



EpubPress

EpubPress - Sat Dec 09
2017

December 7th: Court in Session

Grimbeld's judicial branch used a three-tier court system.

The first hearing was reserved for deliberating whether the accused was guilty or not.

The first hearing took place in one of the district courts in each area.

And in the first hearing's trial, there was only one presiding judge.

By law, there were secretary seats in front of the presiding judge's, and two clerks of court were to sit there.

The visitor's gallery was on the opposite side from the judge's seat. As a general rule, anyone could attend a trial, but in trials with high popularity, only those chosen through lottery could sit in.

And the defense and prosecution opposed one another perfectly between the judge and the public.

Looking from the visitor seats, right was defense, and left was prosecution.

The target of all this setup, the defendant sat on a bench in front of the defense's seat.

The prosecution asserted the accused's guilt, while the defense proclaimed their innocence.

That was the schema of Grimbeld's courts.

No matter what sort of case it was, the defense would assert innocence. Regardless of the disadvantageous standing, protecting the client's interest was our job.

December 7th. I was the only one in the waiting room on the defense's side.

The clock hung on the wall informed me the trial would be starting before long.

The time approached minute at a time. I read through the documents, and discerned this was the only way left to get the defendant off with a not guilty.

I heard a knock at the door.

“It’s time.”

The bailiff of the court came for me.

I loosened my necktie and took a deep breath. And holding the briefcase with all the documents, I left the waiting room.

Leaving the hallway, I opened the door to the courtroom. The courthouse was filled with a peculiar air.

In a majority of criminal cases, an audience wouldn’t gather. For most criminal cases were theft or injury, nothing but small incidents.

But murder was a different story. Many people felt concern at the case, impelling them to gather at the gallery.

And I’m sure this case was a peculiar color when put against other ones.

Watching the noisy, rabbling audience, I took my seat at the defense side. As I was lining up my papers, someone came over to the other side.

It was a man who was still young. With tidy appearance, somewhat awkward where he stood. Probably the prosecutor’s assistant officer.

As he lined up the documents on the prosecution’s side, the scraping sound of high heels followed before long.

And here she comes.

As if the verdict has already been called, with a leisurely smile on her face, Caitlin Schaefer entered the courtroom, and took her seat at the prosecution.

There was a courtroom sketch artist in the front-most seat of the peanut gallery, and he was staring in awe at Cate’s dramatic entry as he eagerly moved his brush.

... She sure is a popular one.

The defense, the prosecution, and the audience seats were filled. The judge entered, with the clerks following behind.

The judge and clerks were wearing black robes of the same make, but in contrast to the clerks’ cotton, the presiding judge’s robe was silk.

A qualitative difference in the small things, I mused as I watched the judge and clerks take their seats.

“Ahem.”

Taking his seat, the elderly appropriately-white-bearded judge cleared his throat, eventually slamming his gavel.

“Silence.”

With his voice, the court’s – especially the visitor’s gallery’s-clamor went still.

“We will now commence the first hearing.”

“The prosecution is ready.”

Caitlin Schaefer stood from her seat, and proclaimed with an imposing stance.

I also stood, and looked at the prosecution. Caitlin’s sharp eyes were piercing through me, but I wasn’t going to lose.

“The defense is ready, m’lud.”

The trial... began.

Charging the Hero

*Maou Dakedo Yuushano Koto Kokuso Suru Kotoni
Shitakara*

Arc 2: Trial

by Kawasaki Moe

[Novel Updates](#)

Translation Group: [Yoraikun Translation](#)

Epub: [Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

Opening Statements (1)

“Alright. To cut to the chase, I’d like to hear your opening statements, but prosecutor Schaefer? It seems the defendant has yet to arrive?”

Cate moved her eyes from me to the judge. She spoke with an expression fully loaded with composure.

“My deepest apologies, m’lud. Please give it some time. At present, the accused is being bound so she cannot lash out.”

“Wait a second.”

I spoke without a moment’s delay.

“There’s no way such inhumane treatment should be permitted during a trial. Without doing anything unnecessary, just bring her in at once.”

“We can’t be doing that. While in custody, the accused has attempted escape a total of twelve times. Just the other day, she committed acts of violence against the guards. In the case where there is a fear of escape during the trial, handcuffs and shackles are permitted by the criminal procedure code, Mr. Lawyer.”

“I know that. But when restraints are necessary, it requires the permission of the court. Have you gotten permission?”

“Oh my, oh my. It seems someone’s studied their share of criminal code. But aren’t you a bit insufficient? In the case where the accused has attempted flight and violence during transport to the court, the right to bind them without court order arises. In this case, there’s no issue if it’s ex-post-facto approval.”

Cate, no Prosecutor Schaefer said that, looking at the judge again.

“M’lud. During transport, the accused assaulted a prison guard, and attempted escape. She’s frequently performed similar acts in the past, and more than anything, there was a high urgency, so as an exception, I used my authority to restrain her. Will you give permission?”

In regards to the elder judge likely over fifty, no sixty, the prosecutor in her twenties took on an attitude that demanded a yes.

“Y-yes. If that’s the case, there’s no helping it. Then we shall take a brief recess until she is sufficiently bound...”

“There’s no need to worry about that.”

As Prosecutor Schaefer touched a hand to her hip, she looked to the courtroom’s doors.

“It’s already finished. Bailiff, bring her in.”

Her timing was so perfect it was as if she was waiting for this conversation. In truth, I’m sure she was. The doors opened grandly, showing the scenery outside. As everyone turned in that direction at once, the gallery broke into confusion.

I was the same. Those weren’t something as kind as restraints. Sat into a solid chair of iron, there was the defendant Claudia Rheinland.

And I thought. Was that really Claudia?

It wasn’t unreasonable for me to think it. Partly because her eyes were blindfolded with black cloth. More than half her face was wholly covered up, and you could only barely see a gap for her nose holes.

Her mouth as well. Forced to bite a gag, her mouth was open wide, ample saliva dripping down it.

Both her arms were twisted to her back, fastened in place with black manacles. On top of that, both her feet were fettered, the other end of the chains bound tight to the chair’s legs.

There was hemp rope wrapped around her waist, tied tightly so she couldn’t part her body from the chair.

... There were repeated restraints to make sure she definitely wouldn’t get away, and if I hadn’t seen her in the vising room, I would never have been able to determine who was before my eyes.

Bound to her chair, Claudia was loaded on a pushcart. That was likely how they brought her all the way here.

Two bailiffs, one pushed the cart, while the other supported the defendant’s chair to make sure it didn’t lose balance and fall over.

The rattling sound of the cart's spinning wheels, and those occasional growl-like voices from the accused. Eventually, the bailiffs came all the way to me, unloading the defendant beside the bench she would normally be sitting in.

Because of those sturdy-looking handcuffs, it looked exceedingly heavy, but perhaps it was actually light, or the bailiff was strong, as it wasn't any trouble for him to lift the defendant up and set her down. It was over soon enough.

As everyone gulped down their spit watching over it, Prosecutor Schaefer alone spoke as if it were natural.

"Well then M'lud. Let's start the trial."

"Heh? Ah, no, but Prosecutor Schaefer. This is..."

I spoke the continuation of his words. "Wait a minute. This is a blatant and major breach of human rights. Take off the defendant's restraints at once."

"Oh my, oh my. Do words not work on the good attorney? I'm sure I just explained there was a fear of her running away."

"Then the handcuffs are enough. There's no need to go this far!

"Hmm, truly..." the judge agreed. "I uphold the defense's objection."

Prosecutor Schaefer gave a disappointed gesture and sighed.

"We did it with everyone here in mind. But so be it. Eugene. Take out the defendant's gag."

"Eh? But..."

"It's fine. Be quick with it."

At that moment, I definitely witnessed it. As Prosecutor Schaefer tapped her assistant's shoulder, that narrow smile forming on her face.

... What? What happens when you take out her gag?

And I noticed.

The excessive restraints. These clear human rights violations. The impression of the judge. And the gag.

Would that twisted Cate really let my objection be taken so easily?

No, that's definitely impossible.

It was all too easy for the ominous feel to come down. The moment the prosecutor assistant called Eugene, The defendant raised a thundering scream through the courtroom.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA/
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Alexander was looking at his watch.

Unperturbed by the cry that made me want to cover my ears, Prosecutor Schaefer's expression spoke volumes of how she knew this was going to happen from the start. She sent a signal to Assistant Eugene.

The assistant immediately returned the gag to her mouth.

“Mmmhmmm! MMmmmh!!”

After letting out a voice you couldn't call a voice, Claudia went quiet. But the force with which she bit down on the gag had become something considerable, as a twisting, grating sound continued perpetually.

“Does everyone understand? The accused is extremely violent, and there’s no telling what she’ll do. M’lud. This is not a breach of human rights. It is a necessary measure. If we don’t go this far, we won’t be able to keep this dangerous, violent defendant in check.”

She sure says it brazenly. I looked at Prosecutor Schaefer's troubled-ish expression as I thought. You actress.

Having been shown such a thing, the judge's impression of the accused was the worst.

This woman hasn't changed a bit. She really is... my natural enemy.

The judge widened his eyes as he looked at the defendant, eventually opening his mouth.

“T-that’s right. Truly. That does seem to be the case. Very well then. With this case as a special exception, the defense’s objection will be dismissed.”

Opening Statements (2)

Whap... the judge's gavel resounded through the room, silence returning. If there was some sound to speak of, it was only the low moans of the defendant, and the clatter of chains.

"Well then..." said the judge, "I think it's about time we got to our deliberation. First, an outline of the case if you will, Prosecutor Schaefer."

Prosecutor Schaefer spoke after a glance at the accused. "Leave it to me.

"The crime came to light on November the 12th around six in the morning. A report came to the police station of Westminster Hotel's precinct that someone had been killed, and two officers headed for the scene. After they arrived, their search revealed portion of a corpse."

"A portion of a corpse?"

As I spoke what was on my mind, for a moment, a wrinkle descended on Prosecutor Schaefer's brow, but she immediately reverted to her usual face of complacency.

... What's this? Does she hate having her opening statement interrupted that much?

Come to think of it, she did always hate being interrupted, that girl.

But when I saw her expression, I got the feeling there was something else irritating her.

Paying no mind to my motives, Prosecutor Schaefer spoke.

"The body wasn't left in perfect condition, Mr. Lawyer. The joint at the base of the right arm had been severed. The freshly-severed right arm had fallen onto the scene."

"I-I see."

It was a scene I didn't really want to imagine. To be honest, I wasn't too good with human blood. Even more so when it involved bare flesh.

"Hmm, so the right arm was severed. Then what was the cause of death?"

When the judge said that with a refined expression, the prosecution went on.

“There wasn’t a vital reaction from the severed portion. We believe it was severed post-mortem. The specific cause of death is yet unknown. We’re in the middle of investigations.”

“Is that so. Then please hurry and identify it.”

“Leave it to me,” said Prosecutor Schaefer with an especially high level of confidence. “The forensic staff are a talented bunch, so I’m sure they’ll gallantly answer to your expectations, M’lud.”

“Hmhmm. That sounds reliable.”

...Then I’d appreciate if they’d have identified it already. I wanted to retort to the harmonious air forming around the judge and prosecution.

“The conversation has derailed. Then next I’ll speak to the estimated time of death, the victim died the day prior to the report. November 11th, likely between the hours of nine and eleven pm.”

November eleventh, nine to eleven, huh. I confirmed the documents lined up on the table. Nothing particularly strange yet.

“The victim’s name was Hal Anderson. It seem he had come to the hotel where his remains were found for work-related purposes.”

“What was his work?”

On my question, she gave an immediate reply. “He was hired for the hotel’s night security. The victim was a guard dispatched by a security firm. He was contracted to the hotel to take the night watch three days a week, and November 11th would have been his first day on the job. Let me distribute a photo of the victim’s face.”

Under Prosecutor Schaefer’s order, the bailiff handed the victim’s picture, and the documents pertaining to the cause of death over to the judge and me.

I had received a photo of the victim from the boss, but this one was enlarged, and easier to make out.

Looking at his photo alone, he looked to be in his mid-twenties, but just based on his record, that was strange.

Short-cut black hair, and a nose well in order. Canines tapered to a point, on top of his slanted eyes gave the immediate impression of a youngster trying to act tough, but he was a bonifide magi.

Magi were long-lived. Perhaps his age was much higher than his appearance would imply.

“Based on the police’s investigation...” On Prosecutor Schaefer’s voice, I looked up with a blank expression. It does seem her opening statement was still underway.

“The victim was killed in the middle of his rounds. After he left the guard room on the second floor, he boarded the elevator, and went straight to the viewing platform on the roof. His company had ordered him to patrol each floor in order, from the roof to the ground, so ’twas common knowledge where he was going. The defendant lay in wait for the victim on the roof, and murdered him there.”

“Wait a second.”

On my interruption, Prosecutor Schaefer let out a bored sigh. “What could it be, Mr. Lawyer?”

“There’s a disparity between the investigation report I received, and the prosecution’s assertion. Were the remains not found in the park?”

“Oh my, oh my, you really do love to jump to conclusions, don’t you.”

She sneered at me.

“Just because the body was found in the park, that doesn’t mean that was the scene of the murder, right?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That’s simple. After the accused murdered the victim on the hotel roof, the body fell from there. Isn’t that all there is to it?”

“You say as if you saw it first-hand.”

I objected. But the prosecution didn’t take it as rebuttal, I could tell by the twitch of joy across her face she gave in response.

“Hmhmhm. As if I saw it first-hand? Of course I did. I saw it with these eyes.”

“Prosecutor Schaefer? What do you mean by that? Please explain yourself.”

The judge asked a plausible question.

“Is it so hard? Truly? It’s really quite simple. The hotel had a security camera. Of course, there was a camera to monitor the elevator, and one to monitor the viewing platform. It was captured there. The scene of the accused tearing across the victim’s back with her sword.”

The gallery grew rowdy.

Perhaps I had asked an unnecessary question.

Opening Statements (3)

“This is the footage from the 11th of November.”

Prosecutor Schaefer held three CDs in her hands, holding them up high so the whole court could see them.

“The proof is in the pudding. Please watch the first clip first.”

Every time her clear, carrying voice traversed the courtroom, my heart raised alarm bells. I’m begging you, please don’t bring out any more disadvantageous evidence.

Throwing my opinion to the wind, Prosecutor Schaefer issued prompt orders. But the only thing she did was give orders, and the one actually starting up the courtroom’s magic apparatus, and doing it all was someone else.

All the good prosecutor had to do was insert the disk into the CD slot on the prosecution desk, and that alone was enough to reproduce its images.

“Is everyone ready?”

As if that was the signal, the court’s lights suddenly went out, making everything pitch black. In exchange, a rough, monochrome sandstorm swept over the center of the room, forming a giant image.

It was an air-projecting display. The word, ‘Pause’, was displayed in the top right to indicate the large display wasn’t playing anything yet.

“Then let’s playback. It’s a bit shocking, so ladies and gentlemen in the gallery. If you’re easily squeamish, please make for the exit. Ready? Then play.”

Her words as the start, the sandstorm display suddenly depicted a monochrome scene. There were fashionable outdoor lighting fixtures, and with those at the base, the surroundings were dimly lit up.

“This is the roof, meaning the footage from the viewing platform.”

On her words, I finally realized that. Sure enough, there was a wall-like thing in the back, and a binocular to the side.

But even if they were there, there was nothing that really stood out. There were stars in the night sky, and not a single scrap of litter on the ground. There wasn't a soul sitting on the benches, and the only movement was on the digital clock ticking up the seconds on the upper right of the display. It was currently 21:16:52.

53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, and the minute slot hit 17. On the right side of the screen, a human figure appeared.

"The victim, Hal Anderson," the prosecutor put in her explanation.

Hal Anderson was wearing a white coat over his guard uniform. He was holding an electric torch in his right hand, approaching the depths of the platform, meaning the place with the binoculars.

Nothing really stood out. If I had to say, he was wearing his guard cap, so I couldn't really make out his face.

Eventually, Hal Anderson made his way to the parapet, suddenly jerking to look at the ground below.

... What? Did he drop something?

Curling his back, he left his flashlight on the floor. Rummaging with something in his hands, if he wasn't wearing a guard uniform, I'd only be able to see him as a suspicious person.

I don't know what he was doing, but nothing particularly happened, and time alone passed by.

As I stared at it blankly, it deluded me to think the video was actually paused, but the time display in the corner continued to move.

When the clock was about to strike 21:30, the footage was paused.

"Now then, from here on's the real deal. From here, the defendant appears, and slices the victim's back with her sword. For those bad with blood, it's a tad grotesque, so if you don't want to see, no one will mind if you make for the door."

I heard some gulping sounds on her words. But not a single person stood from their seat.

“Is that so. Then I must conclude I am proceeding with everyone’s consent. No one complain to me later, please.”

When her words had just about ended, Defendant Claudia who’d been rattling her chains to her point began struggling even harder.

Her complexion was somewhat pale. Was something bad going to show up? Or was it finally getting hard to breath in that thing...

“Wait a second.” Said I to the prosecution. “The defendant has been restrained for a prolonged period. Afford us a brief recess, and...”

Before I could finish, the images were moving. “You should say those sorts of important things sooner, Mr. Lawyer. I already pressed the button.”

That was definitely intentional. I was convinced as I saw the twitches in the corner of her mouth.

The paused digital clock started moving again, the time hitting 21:30. On the left side of the display, from the shadow of a hedge pruned into a rectangle, a humanoid figure in a black hood appeared.

It was a moment’s events. The hooded figure pulled a sword from their coat, and lifting it up high, they lowered it right at the guard, cutting across his back.

The word blood spurt played through my mind for a moment. There was no audio, so I couldn’t directly hear what sort of sound came out, but seeing the deep black liquid spouting into the night sky , my mind arbitrarily played a ‘glop’ sound effect.

The judge furrowed his brow, while the clerks who usually didn’t do anything but dictate opened their eyes wide.

There were some sounds of sobbing mixed in with the crowd. As a stir took up the courtroom, only one, Prosecutor Schaefer was expressionless.

At the start of the footage, because of his guard hat, I had a faint hope that perhaps that wasn’t the victim, but that ended in needless anxiety.

The moment of the swing, the hat fell to the ground, showing his short black hair and his facial features.

No doubt it was the man himself. Shock was passing through his face.

Of course it was. His back was suddenly sliced open in the middle of his rounds. Of course he was surprised. I don't know what the victim was thinking, but he likely tried to run away. He limped as he placed a hand on the parapet for support, eventually slumping over and falling from the viewing platform.

There was only one figure left on the scene. They were wearing a black coat, so it was hard to make out, but their clothing was probably soaked in blood.

Eventually, a wind blew, offering a glimpse of the hood's contents

With her black hair fluttering, it was the defendant, Claudia Rheinland.

Opening Statements (4)

Just how much time had passed?

The shocking contents had caused the court to fall silent momentarily. The only sound was the clatter of the struggling Claudia's shackles, and the "Mmmhm, mhm, mmmm..." Groan she gave off.

As she was blindfolded, I'm she still didn't know what was shown in the video, but from the conversation that led up to it, I'm sure she understood to an extent.

... I'll be golly. That's a decisive scene, isn't it.

I couldn't find an objection to that.

It was all so fresh. But because of that, it contrarily distanced my sense of reality. Surprisingly, perhaps the scene of a person's murder was something like this most of the time.

In that courtroom of silence, the passage of time felt exceedingly long, but the display informed all that one minute had yet to pass from that point.

In the monochrome footage, there was only Claudia on the viewing platform. She was expressionless, but from the rise and drop of her shoulders in breath, perhaps she wasn't so serene beneath.

... What were you thinking when you cut down the person before your eyes?

Hatred, or rage? Grief, or joy...if you put them to words, they were simple feelings, and ones everyone carried in their chests as if it were natural. But a normal person could forget it all come the next day. So even if the normal person held negative feelings towards their foe, it wouldn't usually reach as far as murder.

But she had reached it. Where had she come to hold feelings great enough to kill a man?

I wanted to make it that none of this happened. I wanted to forget what I had just seen. But the evidence before us clearly informed me that the murder was

something that happened in reality.

The viewing platform was the hotel's rooftop. There was no cover above it, the sky still clad in the sporadic lights of stars.

At a glance it could look like a gentle scene, but with how vehemently Claudia's black hair swayed, perhaps a considerably strong wind was blowing.

Whether the November wind was biting, or it was too cold outside, she sheathed her sword, and pulled up her hood again, holding her chest tightly. And as if to say she had no further business here, she turned to leave.

Perhaps there was nothing left to see, as Prosecutor Schaefer gripped the black rectangular remote.

That remote had a laser-pointed function as well, and it was often the case it would be used to point out specific points of video footage.

Of course, as the second disc was already in her opposite hand, I doubt she'd be replaying that one to point anything out.

The gallery and judge read that from her, the silence finally broken, and the clamor starting up once more.

So maybe I was the only one who had noticed it.

As Claudia sheathed away her sword, she continued gripping its hilt in her left hand as she turned away. At that moment, the tip of the sheath hit against the guard regulation cap the victim had dropped, and picked up by the wind, it fell off of the platform.

The moment I confirmed it, the footage returned to its original sandstorm state. When I thought I saw the word 'Pause' pop up, it immediately changed to the word, 'no disk'.

Prosecutor Schaefer spoke. "Then let's move on to the second one."

Just in case, I took note of that final scene, and wrote it down.

Opening Statements (5)

If there was a single sound I could hear here, I'm sure it was the boisterous roar of the sea.

The display in the center of the court showed nothing but a sandstorm, however, once Prosecutor Schaefer inserted the second disc, the scene switched at once.

Unlike the previous footage, this time's seemed to be in some sort of room. But even if you were to call it that, the room was exceedingly narrow, such that ten people would be enough to fill it to the brim.

The room's interior was neat and tidy, with nothing that stood out between the floor, ceiling and walls.

In that room without a single window, there was a door in the center, and beside it was a small, flickering number alongside a line of buttons.

Seeing that, I understood at once. This was...

"This security camera caught footage of the hotel elevator."

As if to take over my mind's voice, Prosecutor Schaefer distinct timbre resounded through the courtroom.

She continued on.

"At present, the elevator is stopped on the second floor. The display should confirm that."

Sure enough, the elevator's interior had a blinking digital number, and it was currently displaying a two.

But it immediately began to move. The elevator swayed with a bump, and the number changed to one.

"The elevator has moved," said the prosecutor. "It is here that the defendant boarded the elevator."

The door opened. From the dim hallway, a hooded figure entered the

elevator.

As the black long coat covered their body down to their feet, an outsider wouldn't be able to determine their figure, let alone their gender.

... To think there was a sword concealed in that coat.

As I predicted, Claudia pushed the elevator's button. She pushed the 'close' button first, before pressing the one for the top floor.

... She was a surprisingly methodical one.

To this point, I'd been seeing her as a monster of unknown origin, but just seeing that action alone made me think the girl in the video really was a normal human.

The elevator started moving again. The number displaying the current floor shifted to 2, 3, 4, 5... once it hit 12, the lift stopped with a terrible sway, and the doors opened up.

After Claudia got out of the elevator, for some reason, she stopped at the side of the door.

... What was she doing there? Wait, could it be she's worrying over how she's supposed to close the door?

My intuition hit the mark. Claudia hit the elevator button from outside. And because of that, the door that was just about to close opened up again, and for some reason, the culprit who had just pushed the button herself stepped back in surprise.

I heard some laughter from the gallery. But despite all that, I didn't quite feel like agreeing with them.

These laughs were ridicule. Seeing a human lower than them, they were laughing only to make a fool of her.

Maybe it really is a good thing you were blindfolded, my fair lady.

The Claudia in the projection had the hood pulled down deep, so I couldn't quite see her expression, but I'm sure she was distraught.

After fidgeting right outside the elevator a bit, the door eventually closed

automatically, and it returned to an empty scenery.

The empty elevator was dull and uninteresting. There weren't any notable changes, but after a while, the elevator began moving again.

This time, the numbers went from 12 to 11, 10, 9, they kept going down, coming to a stop at 2.

"The victim boards the elevator."

Just as Prosecutor Schaefer said, from outside the door came the victim in his guard uniform, Hal Anderson.

With no idea he was going to be killed, he pushed the elevator button in a business-like manner. Without going out of his way to press 'close', his gestures indicated he didn't have any interest in anything besides his destination.

... I guess that was natural. A normal person would know how to ride an elevator.

Then why did Claudia make such an elementary mistake? Did she just spend her life in the countryside, or some backwards region where civilization hadn't developed...

Whatever the case, there was no way of knowing at the present moment.

Even as I thought over questions without answers, the footage played on. Whether it was the elevator or the camera that was shaking wasn't certain, but the quaking screen soon stabilized, and the door opened.

The guard went out to the rooftop viewing platform with composed gait. I doubt he'd push the button outside, even by accident.

After Hal Anderson left, a few tense of seconds passed before the door automatically closed.

There, Prosecutor Schaefer paused the image to switch the second disk for the third.

"Hold it. Is that the end of what was caught on film?"

She took a glance at me. Ignoring my question, she inserted the third CD.

"Both disks show the elevator on the night of the 11th. For documentation

purposes, the cameras are set to switch over at midnight.”

The prosecutor spoke quickly as she stood, but I couldn't quite get what she was trying to say. It seems the judge was the same. After letting out a sigh, Prosecutor Schaefer revised her statement.

“What I'm trying to say, is that the second CD only holds a recording of the 11th from 0:00 to 23:59, while 0:00 to 23:59 of the following day are preserved on this this third disk here.”

“Meaning...” I took over her explanation. “After the guard went outside on the second CD, there was nothing of note recorded?”

“Oh, you're surprisingly insightful, Mr. Lawyer.”

Ekh, this woman. She really does rub in that extra word. Her nature to never forget to abuse her opponents in her speech had always been in place, and in the mock trials, I was always at the receiving end of her sarcasm.

Calm down boy. The only ones who get emotional are the amateurs. Deal with it calmly at all times.

“As the defense has stated, after the guard left the elevator on the second disk, nothing happened up to 23:59. But more importantly, the following footage was taken on the third CD. The footage recorded in the hotel is automatically set to record to a different medium alongside the change of the date. This is a measure on the security side implemented to avoid human error.”

“Hmm, I see, so that's how it is.”

Stroking his white mustache with a finger, the judge let out a somber voice. Perhaps it was the case he didn't fully get it yet.

I'm nervous. About him as well.

“Well then, please take a look at the third video. But even if I say that, there's not much left to see.”

It was an intriguing phrasing, but I chose not to object. I'd rather not say something unnecessary to be hit with her toxicity again.

To prove the prosecution's words as true, the digital clock at the image's edge started the count from 0:00.

For a while, there wasn't any real movement within the footage. The prosecutor hit fast forward on the remote, and the digital clock began turning at an alarming pace. Eventually, when 0:28 was displayed, the elevator's door opened once more.

Before it was a figure wearing the same black coat as before, entering the elevator with composed steps.

... Even so, it really was black. Because blood would stand out on a white coat, did they purposely choose black?

After the black coated figure pushed a button, the door eventually closed, and the elevator began moving.

Arriving on the first floor, the elevator door opened, and the figure in the black hood swiftly slipped into the hall.

"This is where the footage ends. Thus is the criminal course that led to the defendant's murder of the victim."

That was long. In truth, not much time had actually gone by, but because the pressure was so great, it felt as if I had been compelled into penance for several days, weeks even.

But it didn't seem the prosecution intended to end its opening statement yet.

"Next I shall explain how the body made its appearance in the park. Using this fourth footage."

Did this woman intend to settle guilt in the opening statement alone?

I relifted my hips that were about to fall into my chair, and prepared for what was coming.

Opening Statements (6)

“Now then,” said Prosecutor Schaefer, as she took a new CD in hand. “This will be the last one.”

She slotted the disk into the port installed on the prosecution desk.

... So this is the end. What does she plan to show us last?

A new scenery was shown on the air-projecting display. The static changed to a monochrome image, and at the side of the scene was the digital clock display I was becoming accustomed to.

“This is the footage of a camera stationed to survey a passage on the first floor,” explained Prosecutor Schaefer in a mildly business-like tone. “This surveillance camera shows not only the hotel, but a portion of the outside scenery. The point I wish to draw to everyone’s attention is here.”

The courtroom was dim, and the display was the only light source, but there, a new light was added on.

Prosecutor Schaefer turned the remote she held in one hand towards the screen, and from it, a red laser shot out. ‘Twas a laser pointer.

The park was right outside the hall, and as the entire wall was glass, the outside scenery was plainly visible even from inside.

The laser pointer pointed around the center of the screen; a small red dot appeared. As Prosecutor Schaefer moved the remote in spinning motions, the red dot twirled around the screen to match, eventually resting on a large statue in the park’s center.

It was the same statue the boss showed me the other day, the form of the warrior straddling a giant horse was the same as I’d seen it in the photo. Perhaps because of the monochrome, or because this image was filmed at the dead of the night, the impression it gave off was somewhat different to how I remembered it.

... Ah, I see. It’s the snow.

The photo I saw in the boss' office was taken looking up at it from below, but this footage was straight from a hotel hallway. As the hotel camera was set to tape the corridor, it couldn't help but be positioned to take in images looking down from above, causing a different impression in the overall atmosphere from the photo.

When taken from above, the state of the ground was easy to see, and the horse's hooves were completely coated in snow.

The rest of the statue was the same, and looking closely, the warrior's head and shoulders were covered in it.

... Come to think of it, it was snowing on the 11th. Though I don't remember clearly.

But by the time this footage was taken, it seems the snow had already stopped as the stars glistened through the clear night sky.

With that much snow piled up outside, I'm sure it was considerably cold. Of course, to a statue without and blood flowing through it, the temperature didn't matter, and the warrior in the center of the video would always be gallantly raising his swords to the heavens.

"This passageway is..."

The prosecutor paused the footage momentarily, moving her pointer to highlight the passage.

"It's connected to the hall with the elevators. Meaning right above this park is the scene of the crime, the viewing platform."

Hearing that, I felt a bad premonition.

Looking at the side of the screen, I saw the digital clock hit 21:27.

27, 28, 29... once it hit 30, it happened.

It was all so sudden I didn't even have the chance to blink.

A person suddenly appeared at the top of the screen. That figure was falling at an immense speed, colliding straight into the sword the warrior held in the air.

The figure's arms had been held out, its feet pointed at the ground falling in a cross-like shape. Hitting the sword, one of its arms was severed at the joint.

Once the arm flew off, the figure first turned sideways in the air before doing

a rotation. Blood spouted from the severed portion, and as the blood poured out, the body did a spin, making it look as if it were a human firework. But that body now had only one arm, and the other had long fallen to the snow-covered ground.

The white snow was stained a darker shade. If it weren't monochrome, I'm sure it would be the red of fresh blood.

It wasn't just the arm that fell to the ground, naturally, the body was also falling by gravity, but by the impact with the sword, the body's falling point was set off, and after hitting the hedge, it rebounded, and fell onto the other side.

The hedge was cut into a rectangular shape, and its surface was white from the snow, but the one part the body hit lost its coating and looked black on film.

It was much too cruel, too fresh, and a scene somewhat removed from reality.

No one said a word, as silence took up the court. Time alone passed in vain. Eventually, the court's lights were lit, my vision turning bright. The air projecting display in the court's center went transparent from the ceiling lights, but after the prosecution hit a switch, it went out in the blink of an eye.

"That is all. That is how the event transpired. I will now go on to read the written indictment."

Prosecutor Schaefer wasn't smiling anymore. The look in her eyes was sharp as she stared at Claudia... no, I'm sure Cate wasn't even looking at her as a person anymore.

She was treating her as a simple inhuman criminal.

In order to hand down a guilty to the accused, the prosecution started establishing the defendant.

Indictment

With cold eyes, Prosecutor Schaefer read out the indictment she held in one hand.

“As of today, December the 7th, the prosecution charges that in the viewing platform of the Westminster hotel, Claudia Rheinland defendant herein, with systematic and methodical planning, and malice aforethought, did carry out murder of the first degree.”

First degree murder. Meaning unless proven innocent, it was death or life in prison. Whichever it was, if her guilt was decided, it was the end of her life.

“The defendant’s name is Claudia Rheinland, 18, uncertain address, nationality... nonexistent.”

Hmm? No nationality? That’s troubling.

In a normal country, in the case a foreigner committed a crime within its borders, based on international treaty, it was possible for the criminal to be handed over to their country of citizenship.

But of course, as Grimbeld didn’t have a single prisoner exchange treaty tied with another country, they wouldn’t hand foreigners over even for a minor offense, and there’s no way anyone would be tried under foreign law. Any crime that happened within the country was punished by the country as principle.

However, the sort of judgement they would receive was entrusted to the laws of their nationality.

For example, if a person from a country without a death penalty committed first-degree-murder in Grimbeld, even if their guilt was certain, the charges would adopt the administration of justice from their homeland, and the accused would not be able to be handed death.

But the situation was different for nonexistent nationality.

Prosecutor Schaefer spoke on.

“The accused is not of Grimbeldan nationality. But by the rule of equal treatment under our constitutional law, as well as the special law reserved for foreign criminals, as a special exception, the accused will be considered a citizen of Grimbeld in all further legal procedures.”

Slamming the indictment down on the desk, Prosecutor Schaefer spoke as if looking down on the defendant.

“It means there’s nowhere for you to run, little girl.”

Establishing the Defendant

“Now we move on to establishing the defendant, but she can’t even speak in that state in the first place.”

Splendid deduction. In what world will you find a lifeform that can talk while biting into a gag?

But raising an objection here wasn’t the best plan.

With definite evidence, and a failure to apply international treaty... there was only one means that remained for me to get the accused not guilty.

I really was hating myself. If I didn’t rely on this method, I would be unable to help anyone.

“Really, what shall we do, Mr. Lawyer?”

Prosecutor Schaefer forcefully invited me in. I guess I’ll jump into her trap again.

“The defendant is under intense psychological stress. We can’t ask any unnecessary questions, and if it were only simple questions, there would be no need to seek an explanation from the one in question.”

On my words, Prosecutor Schaefer grinned. The judge closed both his eyes, deep in thought.

“Hmm, that does seem to be the case. Prosecutor Schaefer, make sure to keep your questions to only the essential points. Make sure to refrain from any conduct that would make ill of the defendant’s standing.”

“Understood M’lud.”

Prosecutor Schaefer made a face as if she didn’t have any ulterior motives, but she instantly returned to her former cold expression, turning to the accused.

“Well then, defendant. There is no mistaking that you are Claudia Rheinland? Nod once for yes.”

Personally, if she didn't nod and simply continued rattling her chains, it would be something I would be thankful for given my future strategy, but in opposition to my intent, Claudia gave a single nod.

"There is no mistaking that you are 18 years of age, no nationality?"

There was a bit of space after that that question. Claudia simply growled "Uuuuuuu!" like a stray dog, but after Prosecutor Schaefer insisted, "I don't mind removing your blindfold if you answer the question," she gave another nod.

From the moment I first met her in the visiting room, I had thought that perhaps human interaction was impossible with this girl, but it does seem words were getting through, and a level of exchange was possible.

"Very well. Eugene, take off her blindfold."

Prosecutorial assistant Eugene stood from his seat, and approached this side. He stood behind Claudia, removing the blindfold with timid movements.

Once the cloth covering the upper half of her face was removed, Claudia took a large swing of her head, and with that moment, her black, flowing hair swung through the air.

Claudia's true face had finally been revealed to the court. Albeit, she was still gagged, but seeing her pale, translucent skin, and moist blue eyes, I could tell that not only the people of the gallery, even the presiding judge swallowed his spit.

It's true they had seen her face on the security camera, but an image and reality were different. There was a completely different person from the one they were painting in their minds before them, and I'm sure it was confusing them.

They were imagining someone more atrocious.

She was a criminal who attacked someone, so they had been expecting a wilder expression.

She was a murdering fiend, so they were thinking of her as a devil of a woman.

It was only natural to think it from the flow of the trial. But a wielder of looks to betray such expectations was sitting in the defendant's seat.

The gallery was astir, the courtroom sketch artist forgetting himself momentarily in a daze, but he immediately dispatched his brush.

She was a beautiful girl unworthy of the label of criminal.

"Claudia Rheinland. You have been indicted under the charge of first degree murder. Make sure you take that to heart. You are of no nationality, but just as a citizen of Grimbeld, you have been granted the right to assert your innocence, the right to an attorney, the right to deny disadvantageous testimony, and the obligation to submit yourself to punishment in the case you are declared guilty. Well then, Mr. Lawyer, let us hear what you have to say. Of course, if you find no fault in the prosecution's indictment, she will receive a guilty verdict. What will you do?

I prepared for the worst.

"The defense pleads not guilty."

Defense's Claims (1)

"Not guilty... you say?"

Prosecutor Schaefer shot back as if she'd heard some joke in terrible taste.

"Are you sane?"

"Didn't you see the camera footage? You weren't so bored that you fell asleep, were you?"

"No need to worry, if it's that data from before, I've perfectly stored it in my head."

"Oh my, oh my. In that case, it only worries me more. If it's to your liking, I'll introduce you a wonderful psychiatrist next time. Just what basis do you have to think the defendant is not guilty?"

Kuh, this woman. She says whatever she wants. The judge could've stepped in to stop it, but he was pretending he never heard it.

Taking my eyes from the judge, I noticed that Claudia was looking at me.

She had heard my voice to that point, so I'm sure she knew who I was, and what standing I had, but for some reason or another, her eyes were wide open.

... What's with that expression? Why are you the surprised one?

Taking a single document off the table, I explained.

"There is basis for her innocence. I cannot think the accused, Claudia Rheinland has the capacity to bear legal responsibility. With unsound mind as the basis, the defense pleads not guilty."

... Ah, I really said it.

The moment the words exited my mouth, I heard a clambering sound different from the rabble up to now. It was completely despising, a noise astir with malice.

I tried my best not to see it, but Claudia's expression underwent such a large change, that it entered my vision whether I liked it or now.

Her surprise had vanished, and she was now glaring at me in hatred.

I know. I was more than well aware of what response I'd get if I said such a thing. But...

... Easy, lady. For whose sake do you think I'm going out of my way to take up the villain's mantle for? Over here, in order to get you not guilty, I'm asserting that the defendant's messed up in the head, thus innocent. How do you think that makes me feel?

"Hmm, I see. So that's how you'll play it."

Prosecutor Schaefer spoke with feigned intrigue. But right now, I didn't have the leisure to pay mind to it.

"It's clear the defendant doesn't have the capacity for responsibility. The fact that she wouldn't be properly standing in this courtroom if the prosecution didn't ignore her human rights to bind her is proof enough."

"I see, I see. Indeed. But was there really any helping it?"

Prosecutor Schaefer gave her rebuttal in a joking manner.

"Let me give a brief explanation of the accused's upbringing. The accused is eighteen. To get to her age, she lived her life under a certain special environment."

"Special, environment, is it, Prosecutor Schaefer?"

On the judge's interjection, the prosecution spoke.

"Exactly, m'lud. From the moment of her birth, the defendant has lived without interaction from any human being besides her parents."

"W-what are you talking about? Something like that isn't possible."

"Exactly, Mr. Lawyer. It would be impossible for a normal human. But the defendant here is a human without a nationality. Normally, it's something some public office will deliver the moment a person is born into the world. But the accused was born into an environment where that wasn't possible."

What that supposed to be. That place... no I can't say it doesn't exist. But that place is...

"She's from no-man's land?"

“Exactly. There are 34 stateless regions in the world at present. Within one of them, the Dark Forest, she received her life, and grew to where she is now.”

A stir through the courtroom.

The Dark Forest. It was a sort of quarantined space. That forest where brutal, fiendish monsters made a home was notorious as one of the most dangerous regions in the world. For starters, it wasn't a place any normal person would be able to live, and because of its sheer danger, all countries had drawn back their borders, making it a no-man's land.

I looked at the accused again... you did good, surviving to this day.

“How she lived her life in the Dark Forest? That is irrelevant to the problem at hand. There is but one important point; raised in an environment crowded with monsters, it's the most natural of things for her temperament to be wild, is it not? Let alone the fact she was suddenly made stand in a courtroom with so many people around her. For a muscle-bound fool who did nothing but fight in her life, perhaps the court is a little too heavy a load. It isn't unreasonable for her to feel stressed or panicked.”

“Prosecutor Schaefer, you've said too much.”

On the judge's rebuke, the Prosecutor offered an elegant yet short, “My apologies.”

“So do you have any further objections, Mr. Lawyer?”

“I understand well that the accused's upbringing was exceedingly special. However, that fails to prove anything. And there is a fact that proves the defendant is of unsound mind.”

“Oh really? That's the first I'm hearing of it.

... This shameless woman.

“I won't let you say you don't know. By the police's report, there was a passage of how, during the defendant's examination, she grew exceedingly violent under certain conditions.”

“Certain conditions? And what would they be? I'd like to hear it in detail, Mr. Lawyer.”

The document I got from the boss were the police's to begin with. There's no way this woman on the police side wouldn't know about it. So this was... blatant provocation.

I don't know what her intentions were, but so be it. I'll take it up.

"At first, the defendant was extremely cooperative when it came to investigations. But only when the sword in her possession was taken from her, did she grow panicked, and lash out in violence. Exactly the state we see her in now."

"Oh. Is that true?"

The judge showed some interest. Maybe this was my chance. I opened my mouth, and the moment my voice was about to come out, Prosecutor Schaefer's voice cut in.

"It is true, m'lud. For some reason, the defendant was level-headed only when she held the sword, and showed symptoms of lashing out only when the sword was forcefully taken away."

"Hmm, that means... what would that mean?"

I tried to answer the judge's question, but that was also interrupted.

"The defense is likely trying to say the defendant is under the effect of some magic, or perhaps a curse. Meaning, he wishes to claim she may have been in a brainwashed state."

... W-what's with her.

I had a really bad premonition.

... Why did she go out of her way to say it herself? If she said such a thing, won't it prove the the defendant didn't have the capacity for responsibility at the time of the crime?

Of course, that was an exceedingly convenient development for me. If I could use unsound mind to prove the accused didn't have the capacity, that would give me the advantage in this trial. Regardless of whether there be evidence that she was the murderer, I could win a not guilty.

... Of course, there was no guarantee that outcome would be to this young

girl's benefit.

"First of all, in regards to the possibility of magic, there's none."

The prosecutor denied it so easily.

"I know you aren't that familiar with criminal cases, so there may be a lot you don't know, but if you use magic, it will leave a trace. If someone cast a magic that controls others, then it certainly would be possible for the defendant to have been forced into committing the crime. However..."

Her mouth was curved into a smile. But her eyes were cold.

"If they did such a thing, it would be found out at once with magic parsing. By the results of magic theory lab's investigations, there have found absolutely no traces of magic being used on the defendant's mind."

"T-then what about a curse?"

"There's only a handful of people capable of casting curses left in the world. When she lived so long in a place separate from human habitation, it would be difficult for anyone to cast a curse on her. Ah, while I'm at it, the science side of the crime lab denied the possibility of brainwashing through chemicals. She never even used drugs. No one could have controlled her with magic, and using herbs to put her under mind control was impossible."

"T-then an unknown..."

"Mr. Lawyer, you don't mean to say a form of magic yet unknown to man was controlling her, or something as absurd as that, right?"

Urgh, yes I was.

Prosecutor Schaefer let out a sigh.

"How exceedingly foolish. It's lamentable. Let me call it a habit of evil. It's true in the past, various natural phenomena of this world were explained away by magic. When lightning fell, that was because of magic. Lighting a fire was because of magic. That we humans are alive was because of magic. Magic. Magic. Magic. Truly, magic sure is a convenient word. If there's something you don't get, you just have to blame it all on magic, after all."

Prosecutor Schaefer made an extreme face of belittlement.

“I’m not joking here. Just what century do you think we’re living in? And this is the home of law. The space for all truths to come to light. It’s true, in the case the defendant was brainwashed through magic or curse, she likely wouldn’t have the obligation to take responsibility. But too bad. The defendant is normal by all means, and has the capacity to think over things logically.”

“Y-you’re saying you can prove it?”

I thought I had objected with all my might, but Prosecutor Schaefer easily shot down my bluff with the most leisurely of smiles.

“Of course I can. Just who do you think I am?”

I finally noticed. Perhaps I had taken her provocations too well, and followed straight into her trap...

Defense's Claims (2) Prosecution's Rebuttal

Clink clank, the sound of chains broke the silence, the sound of metal that rang through the court from times immemorial.

I'm sure there were plenty of people who found this constant jingling to be unpleasant. To an extent where there were people in the gallery looking at Claudia with twitching eyebrows.

She looked as if she was struggling for her life, and as it also looked as if she was trying to wriggle free and run, Prosecutor Schaefer pointed at Claudia.

"M'lud, just what does it look like the defendant is attempting to do right now?"

"Hm? What the defendant is doing... to me, it doesn't seem as if she's doing anything particularly special..."

"What are you trying to say?" I objected without a moment's delay. "She's just..."

... Just doing what?

As I tried searching for my next words, I was interrupted.

"Just struggling, is that what you're trying to say?"

"That's..."

"Are you listening, Mr. Lawyer? It is true her conduct may seem incoherent. Arrested by the police, when she had taken on an exceedingly cooperative attitude, she suddenly lashed out, attempting escape after escape, as if she has no consistency to speak of."

"Therefore, I've asserted a number of times that she lacks the ability to appreciate her situation."

Tsk, ts, ts... the prosecutor touched her index finger to her lips, clicking her tongue as if making a fool of me.

"She isn't struggling. It's the opposite. She's putting all her effort towards calmly cognizing her current situation. As a result, she had no choice but to take

illogical actions.”

Prosecutor Schaefer took a document fastened with a clip in hand, and continued on.

“Here, I have the defendant’s psychological evaluation from a reputable psychiatrist. By the doctor’s diagnosis, the client has a severe case of security blanket syndrome and nothing more.”

“B-blanket?”

I returned the word I didn’t have any familiarity with.

“Safety blanket syndrome. A psychological disorder. Do you have a grandchild, m’lud?”

“Me? Yes, I’ve a grandson who’ll turn three this year. He’s just the cutest, and...”

“Since he’s m’lud’s grandson, I’m sure he’s simply adorable.”

“Ohoh. The truth is, he came over to play the other month and...”

“Excuse me! What relation does that have to the case!?”

It sounded as if the judge’s story was going to drag on, so I objected before I knew it, but the prosecution just gave a cold reply of, “Isn’t it obvious?”

... I hate these guys.

“Then to return to the main topic, when he sleeps at night, does your grandson sleep alongside a stuffed animal, or something of the sort?”

“Oh, I’m surprised you knew. The truth is, I gave him a stuffed bear for his birthday, but he always walks around without parting from it, and that’s just the cutest, or should I say it’s a sight for sore eyes, or should I say, he holds it in his small hands and does his utmost to never left it go...”

The judge’s grandson bragging continued, but it didn’t seem very relevant to the case.

“And that’s safety blanket syndrome.”

The prosecutor interrupted the eternal continuation of the judge’s grandson talk with perfect timing.

“The condition where a small child is not able to sleep at night without their

favorite plushy or blanket is called safety blanket syndrome. By embracing that stuffed animal, your grandson is able to go to bed with some peace of mind.”
“Oho, so that’s how it is. I didn’t know that. The truth is, my daughter’s been worried lately. Over what to do if he never lets go of that bear to the time he becomes an adult...”

“You’ve no need to worry. As long as he ages, he’ll eventually learn to sleep without it in his arms.”

“W-wait a second!”

Just what is she talking about?

“The prosecution has just asserted the defendant to suffer from safety blanket syndrome. But isn’t that a matter of children? The defendant is already...”

I pointed at the defendant. And I thought... was eighteen still considered a child, or an adult?

I was worried over which it was, but I’m sure both were correct, and I got the feeling neither was wrong. In that case, I need only pick the option most convenient to me.

“The defendant is already... an adult. She’s still young, but she isn’t as small as m’lud’s grandson.”

“Exactly,” the prosecution easily admitted. And she spoke, “That’s exactly why it’s a problem.”

“When plaguing a child, safety blanket syndrome poses no particular problems. It’s a problem when it continues on to adulthood. Just look at the defendant’s feet. Her nervous tics are coming out, and she can’t help but rattle the chains on her legs again and again, right?”

Defense's Claims (3) Prosecution's Rebuttal

I moved myself a bit, and looked at Claudia head-on. There, I finally found the identity of what had been rattling all this time.

To the point, I had been convinced she was trying to break the cuffs on her hands, but that was wrong. While it's true there was a red line around her wrists showing that she had tried to break her handcuffs a number of times, what stood out most was the unconscious tapping of her feet.

"A sudden irregular movement of the body is called a tic. I'm sure everyone's seen it at least once in their lives. But perhaps you won't have an opportunity in your everyday life to see it break out so incessantly."

"Break out, you say?"

Come to think of, since the start of this trial, I'd heard Claudia's voice leak out a number of times.

So those... weren't her trying to threaten anyone.

"But to contain her safety blanket syndrome, she'll need her plushy or blanket, right?"

"To be more precise, it will return her sense of security. To a child, it doesn't matter what their symbol of peace is. For every child tormented by anxiety in the absence of their plushy, there's one that can never part from his mother. Both stuffed animals and mothers become symbols of security to the child."

"The defendant, this girl doesn't have anything of the sort."

"No, she does. Though she doesn't have it at this moment, she never let it leave her side as she assisted the investigation, and she held it so dearly she'd put up a desperate resistance whenever it was force out of her hands."

What's that. No, I realized it a while back.

"The defendant has lived her whole life in a forest where exceedingly dangerous monsters loiter about. Naturally, her mental strain and insecurities can't be compared to any normal human. To her, the symbol that can restore her sense of security, that is..."

... Give it back, she had sincerely pleaded in the visiting room.

“Her weapon. To her, while being something to attack with, her sword was also the plushy and blanket of her childhood. Meaning it’s an existence like that of a mother.”

Prosecutor Schaefer exchanged a look with the prosecutorial assistant beside her. And with movements as if they had discussed it beforehand, the assistant took out the holy sword Blutgang from under the desk.

Just as I had seen in the documents, no to an even greater extent, it was a sloppy sword. There were conspicuous black smudges scattered over the scabbard, and a portion of the guard had chipped away. The grip was covered in deep fingerprints, and without the sublimity one would expect from a holy sword, it looked more accurate to call it junk or trash.

From the eyes of a normal person, it looked plain dull. But to Claudia, that was the holy sword more important than anything in the world.

Prosecutor Schaefer carefully placed the sword atop the desk. Conveying just right the vestiges it was the stuffed animal that had spent many a year beside her.

Defense's Claims (4) Prosecution's Rebuttal

"It's simply the security blanket syndrome common to children. There are some people troubled by its symptoms even later in life. Even an adult who's usually extremely calm and levelheaded can find difficulty sleeping if their favorite stuffed animal, blanket or pillow isn't beside them. That is a minor case. Of course, if it's kept at that level, it won't pose a problem to one's everyday life, but if the condition is more severe, it may become impossible for one to even attempt to function normally without it."

... Just like our defendant right now, or so Prosecutor Schaefer added on.

"If that's the case," I objected. "If that's the case, then there's even less a reason to seek legal responsibility from her. How does a person incapable of leading a regular everyday life draft up a levelheaded plan to kill another!? Even if this incident was something brought about by her, it couldn't have been premeditated. It would have to be an accident."

"Even if? There is no doubt the defendant attacked someone with this very sword. You've already seen the evidence."

Erk, t-that is...

That previous footage revived in my head. Claudia raising her sword, tearing across the victim's back, that form wasn't one I could possibly forget.

I couldn't' say anything back.

"And one more thing. It's true she suffers from a severe degree of safety blanket syndrome, but this condition only becomes a problem when the plushy, blanket, or in the defendant's case, her sword isn't on her person. You understand what I'm trying to say, right Mr. Lawyer?"

I chewed over Prosecutor Schaefer's words in my head.

The defendant has severe safety blanket syndrome. She's mentally unstable when she doesn't have the sword. But...

"As long as she has the sword, she's decent?"

"Splendid. Work. Sherlock. It's just as you say."

The prosecutor held up the sword so the whole court could see it well.

“The defendant becomes mentally unstable if and only if she doesn’t have this sword. To speak to the contrary, as long as she has it, she is able to logically think over matters with extreme composure. Meaning she has the capacity to take legal responsibility. At the time of the crime, the defendant constantly carried this dangerous weapon on her person. And you say she was of unsound mind?”

Recklessly slamming the sword down on the table, the prosecutor spoke while repeatedly prodding her head with her index finger.

“Nonsense. At the time of the crime, the defendant’s head should have been crystal clear.”

Prosecutor Schaefer lifted up a document, and continued on from there.

“We had a psychiatric expert evaluate the extent to which she could logically deliberate matters in a calm state. Surprisingly enough, it has come to light that the defendant has an exceedingly high aptitude for calculations. In a forest plagued by monsters, she had constantly lived with her head running in full throttle. The defendant is no fool, and neither is she dull. Looking at her thought capabilities alone, she’s a sage compared to those of her age. Right, right, there’s another interesting piece of data here. She even has savant syndrome.”

“Hah? Savant?”

Another unfamiliar word. During this trial, I had gradually altered my image of her from a murderer, to someone who was possibly a normal person, but come so far, I was beginning to question just what this girl was supposed to be again.

“Savant syndrome. When a subject exhibits aptitudes far above the average human restricted to a specific field, it is often seen as a case of the condition.”

“Meaning she is a genius?”

“Interpret it as you will. She can keep track of the current time and date with extreme accuracy.”

“To what level of accuracy would that be?”

The prosecutor flipped through the pages.

“For starters, she knows the current date. Regardless of the special environment without calendars or clocks she was raised in, she can tell the date by instinct. On to the time, in this test, there was a discrepancy of a few seconds, but if it’s on the minute scale, she can hit the time accurately almost every time.”

That’s amazing. But so what? It’s amazing, but to me, it was nothing but disadvantageous data.

Hearing that exchange, the judge frowned as a ruckus and unrest drifted through the air of the courtroom.

I’m sure in this court, there was no longer anyone seeing the accused as a pitiful little girl. Now, she was a rational woman with high calculative capabilities. She had become a simple sly and cruel murderer.

There was no place for compassion.

Finally, I finally understood. It was set to come down to this.

That one... Cate knew this would happen from the moment I met her in the courthouse.

She knew it all. What would happen if you took the sword from the defendant, and what would happen if I tried visiting her while she was in that state, and what plea I would make seeing the disheveled girl, every little piece of it, the trial had started with her knowledge of everything.

I... couldn’t defend anymore.

I’ve no cards in my hand. I surrender. But as if to find fault in me, Prosecutor Schaefer continued pressing me.

“Oh what’s this? Where did that force you had at the start disappear to? But since you accompanied me all the way here, you might as well accompany me to the end.”

Unlike the tidy copy paper she had been using, the prosecutor pulled out an especially dirty sheet.

And she spoke. “This is the journal the accused wrote while in her cell. Here, we have a passage confessing to the crime.”

... Eh?

“This journal was written before she lashed out, when her head was still clear, lending it validity as evidence. It’s written firmly right here. I murdered... it says.”

“W-what? Is that true?”

As the judge leaned forward and asked, Prosecutor Schaefer spoke with a smile full of self-confidence. “Of course, m’lud. I’d like to submit it as evidence.”

The prosecutor put the journal entry, or rather, the dirty sheet into a clear vinyl bag, and handed it to the judge.

The judge groaned, “Muh...” in a grim face as he read through the entry.

“W-what’s written on it!?”

“Mr. Lawyer, even if you don’t get worked up, I’ll still give you a copy.”

As Prosecutor Schaefer said that, assistant Eugene jogged over and handed me a copied page. I snatched it from his hands.

I read the journal from beginning to end.

It was written in especially small letters, and quite hard to read. But around the end, it definitely did say she murdered the demon lord.

Demon lord, meaning the victim? Did Claudia kill him thinking he was the reincarnation of the demon lord?

I thought the contents were ridiculously foolish. But there was only one passage I couldn’t overlook.

... What’s this? Why did she write something like that?

I couldn’t help but let the words out. “Objection.”

I continued on.

“This piece of evidence... is contradictory.”

Defense's Claims (5) Defense's Rebuttal

"... Ah? What was that?"

It looked as if Prosecutor Schaefer's face had frozen for a moment, but she immediately reverted to her face full of confidence.

"Mr. Lockhart," the judge sounded his gavel, and addressed me. "I've had the chance to read through the diary, and I didn't feel that anything was particularly off."

The ones in the courtroom who had read this diary were me, the prosecution, and the judge. As well as Claudia in the defendant seat.

Then what is the meaning of this? When there's a contradiction so blatantly clear, why hasn't anybody noticed it? No, that aside, why didn't Claudia herself point out this fact?

And I remembered... right, Claudia was blindfolded the whole time. So she couldn't have noticed it.

If that's the case... I hesitated for a moment.

Could it be the contradiction in this diary was also Cate's trap?

No, that's not it. Her face just now... she immediately reverted, but only I could tell. That was her face when she was flustered.

Only when this woman was flustered would her expression disappear. Because that was how panicked she was in her head, and she didn't have the leisure to show any expression.

Of course, that was the same as when she was in deep thought, so whether she was expressionless because she was thinking, or she was expressionless from shock, you'd have to have known her a long time to notice the slight differences.

Even so, I understood. Right now, she was flustered from an unexpected occurrence.

Setting thoroughly defeating any foe as a motto, Caitlin Schaefer was the one

who, not only in school, I could never triumph over in our apprentice days as well.

But just once, I had pressed her to a good point. The expression she showed at the time was exactly the cold expression from before.

The woman called Caitlin Schaefer had a weak point of being terrible with irregularities and accidents that didn't go by her carefully constructed plans.

So me objecting with this timing was surely an unexpected thing to her... or so it should be.

... But is it really? I didn't have the confidence to say it definitively.

I shook my head once to dispel my hesitation. And after slamming the desk once with good momentum, I intimidated her.

"Based on the first line, the accused wrote this journal entry on the 5th of December."

"And what of it? I just explained she is a savant. Even if there weren't any calendars or clocks in the detention center, she would be able to tell with her internal clock."

I ignored the prosecutor's condescending tone. This was her plan to lure me into an emotional slip-up.

... So don't pay mind to it.

"That isn't the problem." I pointed out a certain line at the end of the journal. "The true problem with the diary lies here."

... 'Right. It's true, on that night twenty five days ago, I murdered the demon lord.'

"This passage is the greatest problem in this journal."

Prosecutor Schaefer's eyes narrowed, carefully observing the copy in my hands. When she was sure to have a copy of it herself...

It was a short line, so she finished reading it soon enough. "Aaah!" Prosecutor Schaefer suddenly cried out, before muttering, "that can't be..."

"P-prosecutor Schaefer, what is the meaning of this!" The judge's eyes opened wide, as he compared the copy in my hands with the original journal.

“Hmm, their contents are the same, but Mr. Lockhart, what is this supposed to mean?”

“It’s simple. The journal was written on December 5th. And she wrote in the entry that she had killed the victim 25 days prior... meaning, she asserts she killed the victim on November 10th.”

“W-what!? What is that supposed to mean!?”

T-this judge... doesn’t remember anything.

I almost fell powerlessly at the spot, but I managed to keep my footing.

“Listen closely. Based on the prosecution’s autopsy report, the estimated time of the victim’s death is November 11th. There is a contradiction with the day outlined in this journal!”

“Hmuh, this is... t-true! It’s just as you say!”

The judge read the journal with a serious look on his face, and let out a voice of admiration.

“The victim died on...” Prosecutor Schaefer was gritting her teeth in vexation, but after giving the desk a single strong bang, she assumed her specialty poker face.

“November 11th, between nine and eleven post meridian. There is no doubt about it. There is no mistake in the results of the autopsy report, and the security camera footage proves it.”

“But that would contradict the defendant’s testimony.”

“In that case, the defendant is lying. Isn’t that all there is to it?”

Prosecutor Schaefer responded as if it were only natural.

“A lie... you say?”

“Right, a lie. If you’re offended by my phrasing, then a mistake, a memory error, a time pulled out of air, codswallop... this testimony isn’t of much value before the other pieces of evidence. In the case where testimony and evidence contradict, isn’t it obvious the evidence takes precedence?”

“T-that’s...”

Sure enough, the prosecutor’s objection was sound. Of course, it was, but... I

couldn't turn back here.

"She didn't lie."

I had intended to lightly mutter to myself, but the prosecutor's sharp ears caught it.

"What did you say?"

Lies are fine, bluffs are fine, for now...

... I'll object.

"She... the defendant did not lie!"

It was a voice so loud, the gallery that had started making a ruckus was momentarily silenced.

The judge's eyes were open wide, and Prosecutor Schaefer's, no Cate's face was full of shock as well. It was a face I'd never be able to see in our law school days.

Of course, she immediately hid that face, and corrected herself as a professional prosecutor.

And the one most surprised in the courtroom was surely her, Claudia. Her long, black bangs were covering half of her face, but the remaining half of her expression was enough to tell.

her wide-open blue eyes were fixated on me. Because of the gag, I couldn't read her mouth, but it looked as if she wanted to say anything.

"She hasn't told a single lie. There were some misunderstandings, but she's been honest throughout. This journal details her truth without the slightest of falsehoods."

Clap. Clap. Clap. I heard the clapping of hands. They were Prosecutor Schaefer's hands.

"The zeal of a young man, thank you very much. So what of it? As long as you have the cheat sheet called empty ideals, you can say anything, can't you? Rather than that, if you think your opinion is right, then show some evidence."

... That's the rule here, Prosecutor Schaefer added on.

Defense's Claims (6) Defense's Rebuttal

... The rules here, eh?

With those words alone, silence returned to the court. But even so, it wasn't as if they were just keeping quiet. The people in the gallery were just observing me to see what was about to happen.

It wasn't the first time I was bathed in this attention. But as each and every one of them stared with eyes of suspicion and intrigue, I couldn't help but break into a cold swear.

It I were able to prove it here...

... Let's just give up on giving up.

I shook my head to clear my doubts. And I returned the confronting prosecutor's sharp glare head-on.

She was already taking on the same composed, self-confidence loaded expression as usual.

... When she's really such a coward.

No, that's not mistaken. She's a prosecutor. A prosecutor's job was to defend justice. She was only trying to carry out her duty. What's more, to the best of her ability.

Despite that, what about me? I...

Had given up from the start. To be honest, I thought it was a painstaking job. Why did I have to defend this murder, or so some part of me had been looking down on it all.

... You fool.

Why did you give up? When did your job become doubting your client? Cate's enough to handle that role.

I'm...

In the defendant seat was a girl in chains. Was that girl truly a villain?

Whether she was chained or not didn't matter. Even if she didn't have those chains, there's no way a simple little girl would have the legal prowess to prove her own innocence.

Perhaps she had violated the law. But was she really a bad guy? Was she a murderer? Was she a villain great enough to be executed?

Do I doubt her? When I don't know anything? Legal terms aside, when she was even dubious on societal common sense, is it alright to one-sidedly oppress her? To form a group to arbitrarily decide she was evil?

That's wrong, wrong, wrong. Even if everyone in the world decided that a criminal was evil, the defense attorney alone had to continue being their ally.

Even if we were to be betrayed, we can't become the sort to betray.

"The defense... is prepared to prove it."

I barely wrung out my voice.

"Heeh, that sounds interesting."

The prosecution sneered. The judge's somber face turned even sterner, and the eyes from the gallery only grew stronger.

And the accused, Claudia's expression was expressing her internal struggle as to whether it was alright for her to laugh or cry.

The sound of a gavel rang through the courtroom. "Very well, then let us hear Mr. Lockhart's claims."

"Understood."

There was no turning back.

... I had to prove it here. There was no other means.

I'll believe in her. In that case, what's wrong must be the evidence.

But by what we could see in that footage before, I get the feeling there wasn't anything particularly off.

The prosecution had presented four CDs in total.

The first was from November 11th, and it showed Claudia attacking the victim

on the rooftop viewing platform.

The second was from November 11th, it was footage ow the hotel's elevator. The third continued on from the second on November 12th, displaying the footage in the elevator from 0:00 in the morning.

And the Fourth. That was also November 11th, a surveillance camera in a first floor passageway caught the park, and the body falling from the sky.

I activated the display installed in the desk. It was something used to check data and footage submitted as evidence, and one of the same make was installed in both the prosecution's and judge's tables.

It saved and preserved each piece of evidence submitted during the trial, letting the defense and judge, and prosecution inspect them whenever they wanted. Quite useful in reexamining the evidence while the court was in session.

Based on what I could see in the footage, the accused's actions on the day of the crime were clear.

First, she boarded the elevator, headed for the viewing platform on the top floor, and hid herself there.

After that, the victim boarded the elevator, heading to the roof to do his security rounds, and there he was assaulted by the defendant.

The defendant cut his back with her sword, and he fell from the platform. The fourth CD showed how the victim fared after his fateful fall.

After cutting the victim, the defendant boarded the elevator again. Pushing the button to the first floor, she slipped away as soon as the elevator doors opened, fleeing from the scene.

Those were the defendant's actions that the footage revealed. There weren't any unnatural points, and with this much evidence on them, perhaps it was natural the police arrested her.

But in the case that this evidence was false, and the defendant's words were true, there had to be a contradiction in this footage.

The defendant definitely did write a journal. She said the murder was 25 days

before December 5th, meaning it was November 10th.

At the end of the journal...

... 'It seems my lawyer is coming tomorrow. I don't know what sort of person will be coming, but I intend to divulge everything I saw, everything I heard, and everything I did exactly as I know it.'

Was written.

I truly regret it.

The day I went to visit the defendant was December 6th. Yesterday. If at that time, I had gotten her to divulge everything, perhaps it would have gone differently.

Looking at the prosecutor, I contemplated just how much of a pain that woman was. To get the defendant guilty, she would use any means, truly an unpleasant one.

But from the perspective of the victim and his family, you wouldn't find a prosecutor as proficient as her.

If that's how it is, I need only be a proficient defense attorney for the defendant.

Is there no contradiction anywhere?

I stared intently at the footage replaying on the display.

"Hey, Mr. Lawyer. Just when do you plan on offering your rebuttal?"

In regards to my silence, Prosecutor Schaefer cut the hush, and spoke bitterly.

The judge was the same, swinging his gavel once, twice, he looked at me with a face full of anger.

"Defense. If you're going to object, then be prompt with it. Don't needlessly waste our time."

Even so, I remained silent. I did nothing but compare the footage in earnest.

"Defense. Pick up the slack. If you stay silent any further, I must assume you have no objections..."

... There it is.

I spoke without restraint.

“The defense questions the validity of the footage submitted by the prosecution.”

※ Reference

CD1 = Opening Statements (3) (4)

CD2 = Opening Statements (5)

CD3 = Opening Statements (5)

CD4 = Opening Statements (6)

Journal = Prologue

Defense's Claims (7) Defense's Rebuttal

The gallery rose a stir. It was natural. The footage the prosecution presented was just so impactful, without the margin for doubt, they clearly presented Claudia as the culprit.

It was definitive evidence. When I was throwing dirt at it, it was only natural for me to be belittled.

... But no matter who said what, it was truth that I found something. Though I didn't yet know the reason this contradiction was in place.

I didn't know, but come this far, I was going to be thorough with it.

I touched the display screen, and changed the scene.

"First, there is a scene I'd like everyone to see."

After that, all I had to do was press the switch beside the display. With that, just as in the opening statements, all the lights in the court turned off, and an air-projection display appeared in the center of the court.

"Defense," said the judge, his eyes blinking quickly. "What is this?"

"This is the first footage the prosecution showed us all, the footage of the viewing platform on the roof."

The time was set to right after Claudia had attacked the victim. Claudia was in the center of the screen, and just as before, when she turned around, the tip of her hilt hit the hat. After rolling across the dry ground, the guard cap passed through a gap in the parapet, and disappeared into the darkness of night.

I paused the scene there. "Here. Here is the strange point in the footage."

"A strange point..."

Prosecutor Schaefer crossed her arms in thought. "But there's nothing there."

"Hmm. It's just as Prosecutor Schaefer has asserted. I don't see anything particularly strange about this scene."

"Exactly," I agreed with the judge. "There's not a scrap of dust on this roof, no

let me say it like this..."

I took the remote in hand, and turned on the laser pointer. On the air projection display, I pointed the laser at a certain place. The empty ground.

"On this viewing platform... there isn't any snow."

"Eh?"

"Wait."

"What?"

In an instant, I thought time had stopped. That's just how frozen the space seemed, without the slightest movement.

But the gallery immediately started a commotion. "He's right." "There's none." "What does that mean?"

I ignored the commotion, and continued on.

"The scene of the crime is on the hotel's rooftop. Naturally, there isn't another roof or anything of the sort above it. One look at the starry sky in the footage proves it."

"A-aaah!"

Prosecutor Schaefer touched her hand to her mouth, taking a step back.

"Y-y-y-y-ou're exactly right! What does this..."

The judge raised a face of surprise. But my rebuttal wasn't over.

"Are you listening? The prosecution presented this as the footage of November 11th at nine pm. Looking at the fourth video, you can tell that on November 11th at nine pm, there was snow on the park ground. In spite of that, that the roof alone has no buildup is a clear contradiction!"

I touched the display, and changed the scene. It was the fourth CD's footage, and on the air projection display, the view of the park from the first floor hall was shown.

Just as it was before, the site was a land of snow. It wasn't just the ground, the hedge and statue were the same.

I pointed the laser pointer at the corner of the display floating grandly in the

center of the court. The digital number 21:25 was displayed.

“This fourth CD was also presented by the prosecution as footage of November 11th. But just from what we can see of the scene, they take place in two completely different timeframes, and were taken on completely different days!”

“W... w-w-w-... w-what is this!?”

An earth-shattering cry resounded through the courtroom. I’d never heard such a shrill cry in my life. The owner of the voice was... Prosecutor Caitlin Schafer.

D-did I do it?

In regards to my statement, Cate didn’t object, simply slamming the table as she vexingly grit her teeth. She gave one final slam on the table with both hands.

“Daniel!!”

It was the first time my name often called in my law school years was actually used in a court of law. I couldn’t help but be startled.

Because a face I’d never seen before, a fiendish expression was floating on her face, but that also vanished like mist, returning to her base overconfident one.

“Don’t get so stuck up just because there’s no snow on the viewing platform, Mr. Lawyer.”

...!? What is she planning!?

“The viewing platform that became the scene of the crime is one of the hotel’s calls to fame. The scenery you can look down over from up high is awe-inspiring, and its reputation among the guests is superb.”

“Hah? And what about it?”

“There was no snow on the viewing platform? Don’t be foolish. This is a first-rate tourist hotel. If any snow built up, then of course the employees would remove it so it wouldn’t get in the guests’ way!”

“H-however, from what we can see in the video, it was a large amount of

snow. Cleaning it up in such a short timeframe is impossible.”

“I have the weather data here.”

Prosecutor Schaefer swiftly took a document in hand, and read it aloud.

“It’s true that on November 11th, there was snowfall in the neighborhood of the crime scene. The snow fell between the hours of eight and four, making an eight hour timeframe. And after that, the snow let up.”

“Eh?”

“From four to nine, in those five hours, I’m sure they could have done something about the snow.”

“B-but still. If that was the case, why didn’t they do anything for the park? If you’re arguing that the viewing platform is one of the hotel’s landmarks, then the park is as well. If that much snow built up, it would be downright dangerous!”

“Erk, that’s...”

Okay. I was the one in danger there, but I somehow played it off with a bluff.

“They just keep coming, those bluffs of yours...”

Ah, she saw through.

I hit the desk once, glaring at the prosecution as I spoke... “I can say much the same.” And pointing at the defendant seat, I went on.

“Using all those unnecessary tricks. M’lud, the defense requests testimony from the defendant.”

“Muh. Testimony, is it?”

“Yes. Whether she arrived at the scene on the 10th, or the 11th, if we hear the defendant’s testimony, I’m sure that will be cleared up at once.”

“Hmm, but...”

A wrinkle graced the judge’s brow, as he looked at Claudia in the defendant seat.

“M’lud! The reason the defendant grew violent was because she didn’t have her sword. We’ve already proven that she suffers from a psychological disorder.

The defense will not recognize any further breaches of the defendant's human rights. The prosecution is to undo all those restraints at once!"

"Hah!? Don't be stupid," Prosecutor Schaefer spoke up. "You mean to let free a defendant with the risk of flight?"

"Then give her her sword."

Was that taking it too far? I regretted it for a moment, but I dispelled my hesitation.

The gallery's ruckus was noisy. But I didn't have to pay it any mind.

"The defendant will not run away."

This was... already a gamble.

If I failed here... and the defendant lashed out or ran away, I'm sure I'd never be able to gain the judge's trust again. But if even with her sword in hand, she stood to the end without running away...

That was my only chance of victory. I had no choice but to trust her.

"S-something like that is..."

Prosecutor Schaefer strongly gripped her fist, looking at me, the judge, and the defendant.

Whap... the judge's gavel sounded. "There is no helping it."

"As long as there is doubt in the evidence submitted by the prosecution, there is a need to revise it. But we don't have any leads to verify it at present. Now that it's come to this, we can't go without hearing testimony from the defendant. Reluctant as I am, Prosecutor Schafer, please hand the murder weapon... no, please give the defendant her sword."

Making a sour face, but eventually accepting it, the prosecutor said, "Eugene, undo the defendant's restraints. And give her this sword."

Cate violently handed off the sword to assistant Eugene.

Eugene gave a "Y-yes!" before taking the sword, and a set of keys to the defendant's seat.

It's finally here.

It really, really had been long. But with this, her restraints will finally come undone.

The bailiff began by undoing the rope around her waist from behind. The rope slackened, and with a tug of the bailiff, flowing smoothly, it looked as if it were running away from her body.

... Click. I heard the sound of the handcuffs unfastening.

Witness Stand (1) The Accused

The one doing the unlocking was the bailiff, and behind him, prosecutorial assistant Eugene stood with the sword in his hand. Claudia's right and left hand shackles were unlocked first, causing her to scramble to attack and retrieve the sword from Eugene, making my blood run cold, but as the shackles on her ankles were still in place, they pulled her back, causing her to grandly tumble on the spot.

... Thud! Her hands remained firmly held out, so she hit the ground nose-first, giving off an intense impact sound.

I heard some snickers leak out from the gallery.

"Um, are you alright?"

Eugene leaned down and offered her a hand, but Claudia lunged forward, and took the sword in both hands.

Though in the process, the chains pulled at her legs again, causing her to slam into the floor once more. This time, her hands were firmly clasped around the sword, so she didn't hit the ground face-first.

She was merely breathing heavily. Her shoulders were rising up and down intensely, as she desperately gripped the sword hilt so as to never part with it again as she spread herself out on the courtroom floor.

Her ankles were still fettered. They were each connected to the respective leg on the iron chair, and from all the times she'd lashed out, the skin under the shackles alone had turned purple.

The bailiff didn't particularly try to stop her. Since having her go violent was most convenient, perhaps the prosecution had ordered him so, but because of that, without anyone getting in the way, Claudia was able to reunite with her beloved... The moment she held the sword, her menacing air disappeared, and I saw deep relief run across her face.

The shackles on her legs were removed. She could now move freely. But regardless of that, she remained motionless on the floor for a while.

After some time passed by, she took off her own gag. And slapping it down on the spot, it made a bang as it hit the ground. She pressed one hand into the floor, holding the sword in her other, as she rose up with horridly slow movements.

“Defendant, step forward.”

Perhaps she didn't hear the judge's voice, as she merely stood petrified on the spot. For an instant, she sent a look at me, but I had a recollection of those eyes.

When walking the streets, you'd occasionally happen across a stray cat. With no one keeping it company, and continual abuse, the stray cat would become of wild disposition, sending sharp glares as if the entire world were their enemy.

The look in her eyes was precisely that.

There were no allies here. Everyone was an enemy. Looking around with wary eyes, she eventually took a step towards the witness stand.

Witness Stand (2) The Accused

Claudia stood at the witness stand. Even now, her hand was clasped around her sword, and so as not to let go of it again, she was bending down over it.

“Hmm. Then we will be establishing the defendant’s identity once more.” The judge addressed Claudia in a voice full of majesty.

“Defendant, please state your name, age and address.”

Claudia seemed especially hesitant. When the judge gave a glare to her excessive display of suspicious behavior, she raised a small scream of, “eek...” Her eyes imbued with hostility were swimming around the room, as she constantly stood wary of her surroundings.

Nervously using her left hand’s index and thumb to fiddle with her hair, she squeezed out a voice.

“C-c-Claudia... Rheinland...”

“There doesn’t seem to be a mistake. Then your name and address.”

The judge’s tone was even rougher than before. He also looked somewhat irritated.

“I’m eighteen years old... my address is... in the forest...”

“Defendant! Please answer seriously!”

“Eek!”

“M’lud! Please don’t shout at the defendant!”

When I unhesitantly remonstrated the judge, he cleared his throat. “Yes, my apologies,” he said.

“The accused is of no nationality,” Prosecutor Schaefer folded her arms, and spoke with a composed attitude.

“Her address is uncertain in the first place, so even if you ask, she is unable to answer. How about you ask her a different question, M’lud?”

“You do have a point there. Then what shall I ask?”

“Why not... occupation?”

What's with her attitude?

I felt a slight irritation at Prosecutor Schaefer's throw-it-all-to-the-wind phrasing, but I had my feelings in check.

And I felt regret.

... This is bad. Occupation is the worst thing you could ask her.

I thought to stop it, but the judge said, "That sounds about right. Then defendant, please state your occupation," before I could say anything.

"My occupation is..."

I wanted to cover my ears. But there's no way I could actually do it. Regardless of the small crack in Claudia's voice, it resounded surprisingly well through the courtroom, so I could hear it well.

"... hero."

Ah, she said it.

I unintentionally lost my strength, and banged my head on the table.

The court froze over. The judge and the gallery, for an instant, they made faces as if they didn't understand what she had said.

But the one prosecutor who did grasp the situation formed a smile at her mouth as she spoke.

"Oh, is that so? But isn't hero usually what you call the person who defeats a demon lord?"

"I... I killed the demon lord. So I'm probably... a hero.

Just what were all my troubles for? Those words from Claudia were on the verge of knocking me out.

Witness Stand (3) The Accused

“...”

The judge opened his mouth once as if he wanted to say something. His characteristic white beard swayed to and fro, but eventually, he reconsidered, and shut his mouth.

“W-we have successfully established the defendant’s identity. Let’s get right to testimony.”

I tried to end this conversation as soon as possible, but not letting it end like that, the prosecutor said, “Hold it right there,” and gave an objection.

“I can’t let that statement slip by. Just who do you mean by demon lord? I’d love to hear the details.”

“T-that isn’t relevant to the case at hand...”

“Hah? What are you talking about? It’s as relevant as could be. This is a murder case. Just now, the defendant clearly testified, that she was the hero, and that she killed the demon lord. You heard it too, didn’t you m’lud?”

The judge stroked his tufty beard as he took a deep breath, but after a small sigh, he answered. “Hmm, I thought that I had misheard at first, but it does seem my ears are still in working order.”

The prosecutor turned her face away from me, her back trembling.

... This woman was laughing.

“Then let us ask the defendant.”

Her cheeks twitching, the prosecutor continued on. “Is the demon lord you murdered this person?”

The prosecutor held up an enlarged photo of the victim in her right hand for all to see.

Perhaps because the look in her eyes had always been stern, Claudia’s expression didn’t change much, but I’m sure she was trying to get a closer look. She leaned forward to look at the photo.

Thinking of how honestly she'd been answering these questions, perhaps she'd give a simple yes to that query.

When we came all the way here, was it already over...

I was on the verge of acceptance. But Claudia's response was different from what I expected.

"I don't know."

Her small voice cracked from a lack of moisture was hard to hear, but I'm sure that's what Claudia answered.

"You don't know? You mean to say you convinced yourself some random John Doe was the demon lord and killed them?"

"That's... um, it was dark at the time, and the demon lord was wearing a hat, so I couldn't see their face... but... but I... could tell."

"How?"

The prosecution pressed further, but Claudia was hard pressed to answer that one.

... It was bad the way things were going.

Putting aside whether Claudia was the hero or not, if it's made that with no basis, she arbitrarily selected some virtuous commoner, and killed them after convincing herself they were the demon lord, the judge's impression of her would be the worst.

But was there a rational reason?

After thinking a while, I thought up something.

"Oh my, oh my. When I thought you had suddenly grown talkative, now it's silence, is it? You're quite the cowardly hero."

"Hold it."

I objected. "Even if it were a person of completely unknown lineage, the defendant would be able to determine if they were the demon lord or not. The sword in her hands is no ordinary holy sword. It is unable to cut any lifeforms besides the demon lord, a special sword indeed."

With my words as the beginning, the court began growing noisy.

“Holy sword?”

“What?”

“Can only cut the demon lord?”

“Based on police investigation, the holy sword the defendant carries, Blutgang, is unable to touch, let alone cut any lifeform that isn’t the demon lord, and it will pass right through anything else. Meaning, by cutting them with her sword, the defendant was able to determine whether her foe was the demon lord or not.”

“I see. How peculiar... but that does leave the question.”

The judge who raised a surprised expression at the start immediately scrunched his brow, making a grim face as he thought.

“If that is true, that would mean the defendant has killed the demon lord. But by my memory, the demon lord...”

“Died fifty years ago. That’s what you want to say, right m’lud?”

As Prosecutor Schaefer took on the continuation, the judge agreed. “Hmm, at the very least, that’s how I remember it, but my wife’s been saying I’ve grown forgetful lately, and I’m always being scolded... am I wrong?”

“No, your question is spot on, m’lud.” The prosecutor spoke with a radiant smile. “The strange ones are the defense and the defendant.”

I was about to object, but I was interrupted. “I’m not strange at all!”

At first, I couldn’t tell who had spoken. But seeing Claudia with her whole body shaking, I finally understood that she was the origin point of that voice.

“I’m... I did the right thing! What’s so strange about killing the evil demon lord!? Why am I being chastised for killing the one who throws off the world’s peace!? This is strange, this is a mistake!”

Hah, hah, hah...

Within the silence, only Claudia’s rough breath was audible. Her face was bright red, and her eyes were open wide.

It was as if it was the first time she had raised her voice in her life. Of course, that one was a complete verbal slip, and she had merely become good resource

for the prosecution's attack.

"It does seem the defendant is completely mistaken."

The prosecution glared at the defendant with cold eyes. Claudia faltered for a moment, but she soon returned the glare with force. Her lips were tightly pushed together, and it looked as if the girl herself was doing her best. But...

I'm sure everyone in the courtroom could notice her attitude was a bluff.

Seeing it up close, it was something that could be understood at once. The more earnest Claudia became, the more power she put into the hand clenching her sword, and it was beginning to rattle loudly.

"Listen well, little girl. This is a constitutional state. Whether evil or good, the law alone is everything. Your self-centered, self-righteous justice won't do a thing for you here."

... You're the evil one for breaking the rules, little girl. The prosecutor said.

Witness Stand (4) The Accused

“B-but I’m...”

Her firm grip on her sword conveyed her earnesty. Her righteousness. But that voice wouldn’t reach anyone. It merely echoed through the halls in vain.

“I... I only saved the world. I only did a good thing...”

“Yes, I’ve had enough of your pretentiousness.”

Prosecutor Schaefer painstakingly raised her palm, cutting off Claudia’s address.

“To summarize, you’re a murder who admits to killing someone, right? And instead of repenting that killing them was a terrible thing, you try to appear self-important by saying you did a good deed; an idiot with no hopes of salvation. It sends shivers down my spine when I see people like you forcing their self-centric delusions on their surroundings, playing self-righteous ally of justice. In the end, the justice you speak of it just a delusion without any particular basis, isn’t it?”

“T-that’s wrong. Wrong! Wrong wrong wrong... my father wasn’t mistaken!”

Perhaps that was the biggest voice she had given thus far. After Claudia raised a shout like a scream, she covered her face with both hands, and collapsed at the knees.

... Was she... crying?

She was covering her face, so I couldn’t tell. But I’m sure she was.

As she fell into a seat on the floor, her shoulders were shaking. And she muttered a small, “Why won’t anybody understand?”

“M’lud,” the prosecution was harsh to the end. “It doesn’t look like any further trial is necessary. The defendant acknowledges her crime. Now let’s move on to her sentence.”

“H-hold it!!”

What is this woman saying all of a sudden? If I didn't shout out my objection, we were almost going to get a guilty.

"The trial is still underway."

"Hah? What part of it? Just now, we got a confession from the defendant of her own discretion."

"T-that's the same thing as the journal from before, isn't it!?"

"It's completely different."

The prosecution began to speak. "The journal was something the defendant wrote while held in custody. You lawyers always object when these sorts of confessions come out. That this confession isn't valid evidence. You guys really say some rude things. Making it sound as if we used unlawful means to obtain it or something. Give me a break. But even so, we've no means to prove the willingness behind the confessions that come up in police investigations, so we're aaaaalways forced to bite the bullet for it. But this time is different."

Tsk tsk tsk, she clicked her tongue, and pointed at the defendant.

"When did I ever threaten her? Did I force that confession out of her? Did I even ask any leading questions to get her to confess? Yeeeeeeaaaaah... I didn't."

"T-that's..."

Of course she didn't do something like that.

"The prosecution side hasn't done a sinnnnngggle thing. That defendant over there just went off on her own saying I did it, it's not my fault, the demon lord is bad, or so she just confessed, right? This confession has ample validity as evidence."

"B-but the contradiction in the security cameras has yet to be clarified."

"Oh, that? Probably a memory lapse after all. I mean from what I can see, this little girl isn't brave enough to call a hero."

"... Shut it!"

I found myself slamming the table.

"A girl in her teens, her first ever trial, what's more, a murder litigation. There's no way she could offer proper argument. Don't act smart because

you're dealing with an amateur. If there's something you want to say, than say it directly to the defense!"

"Then that's just what I'll do."

My eyes locked with Prosecutor Schaefer's. Her glare was sharp. I felt I would lose the mental battle the moment I took my eyes off of her.

"Defense, prosecution, silence in the court. Even so, hmm. Surely the defendant's previous statement could be accepted as a confession. But the defense's claims hold some weight as well. If the defendant's testimony is true, then why did such a mismatch come about?"

Hearing the judge's words, it occurred to me.

Maybe I couldn't make a complete turnabout to innocent, but I could delay the verdict.

Honestly, I didn't know if Claudia had really killed someone, whether she didn't. Whether she was a good person, or a bad one.

The troublesome part of criminal cases for the defense. When we wanted to trust the client, there were times we could not.

When it's because of these things that I aimed to be a civil lawyer...

... Where did I go wrong?

Being betrayed by a person you trusted is extremely painful. It wounds your heart so deeply you'll want to quit the profession.

But as long as you're just working for the money, the wounds you get are shallow.

Even if you're betrayed, you do it for the money, so you can make an excuse to yourself.

This time, let's go with that. As long as I don't know whether the defendant is a human fit for sin and punishment, putting determining her evil or virtue on hold...

Let's stretch out this trial for some pocket money.

"M'lud. The defense questions the prosecution's manner of gathering

evidence.”

Prosecutor Schaefer’s expression that had been leisurely to that point suddenly stiffened.

As expected, she couldn’t ignore that one. With a snap, a blue vein popped up on her forehead.

“What are you trying to say?”

A cool voice to freeze me over, I felt a sense of achievement as if I was finally closing in on Cate’s true intentions.

I knew. While she used overbearing methods to get her verdict, she was bearer of a nature that would always play fair.

Precisely because she valued the rules, she imposed exceedingly harsh rules on herself as well.

Crueler on herself than she was to others, she would never do anything illegal, for starters. She would occasionally twist things selfishly, but you could always draw a straight line from somewhere.

So I don’t think in the slightest that she had dyed her hands with anything illegal. I don’t, but...

... You did a good job dragging me through hell, wench.

“The defendant is the bearer of an exceedingly honest heart. Enough that one would think evidence to be unnecessary. Yet regardless of that, there is an inconsistency in the security camera footage. Could it be that footage was edited by the police to their convenience?”

... This is a splendid illegal inquiry. Please accompany me to the end of it, Ms. Prosecutor.

Witness Stand (5) Defense's Objection

"Unfortunately, our country's law does not have a stipulate in regards to illegally collected testimony and evidence."

I said to the presiding judge, momentarily shifting my eyes to the prosecutor. She made the face of a demon as she bit the nail of her thumb.

... Sorry Cate. I'm just as much of a pro as you are. I'll use whatever means I must to win a not guilty verdict.

I continued on.

"But there is precedent of the supreme court determining an illegally obtained affidavit to have no validity as evidence. If any form of tricks or editing were bestowed to the security camera footage submitted by the prosecution, then this will become illegal evidence. Naturally, it would have no value in the courtroom, and you cannot use it to convict her."

"Hmm, I understand the defense's claims." The judge's expression was sterner than ever before. "This is a grave situation. If this evidence was achieved through illegal means, this would be a complete desecration towards the principle of warrant."

Whap... the judge hit his gavel, pressing the prosecution. "Prosecutor Schaefer, do you have any objections?"

Seeing Cate's shoulders shaking, I thought.

... What will you do? If you can't prove it isn't illegal, you'll lose your standing here. Of course, if it's you, I'm sure you can easily prove there's no illegality to the evidence.

But that's fine. That's fine as it is.

This evidence has no tricks or contraptions... trying to prove that alone will put a delay on Claudia's hearing.

If she can't prove there wasn't an illegal search, her career as a prosecutor is over.

If she works to prove there was nothing illegal, and that this evidence is valid, the defendant gets an extension on life.

Whichever it is, the one to pull the trigger is you, Cate. How about that?

Prosecutor Schaefer stopped biting her thumbnail, looking down for a moment. Her bangs covered her expression, so I couldn't make it out, but I saw her mouth move a bit. I'm not sure what she said, but I'm sure she was cursing.

As she raised her face to look at me, her expression had not a hint of good will. It was the blank face of a professional.

"The prosecution conducted an illegal investigation? I cannot ignore such an insult. Normally, I'd just write it off as pure idiocy, but very well. I'll prove just how earnestly we deal with investigations every day, and contribute to public order and maintaining the system."

She made an ice-cold look as she lightly opened her mouth again. I couldn't hear her voice, but I could read what she wanted to say from her lips.

... Drop dead, her lips whispered.
So in return, I moved my lips as well.

... Go to hell.
After moving her lips so only I could read them, she made a fearless smile.

Witness Stand (6) Prosecution's Rebuttal

"First, about the CDs we prepared this time around, these are the victim's employer, a security dispatch firm's standard medium for preserving records."

Prosecutor Schaefer took out the previous CDs, holding them up high two per hand. The gallery's eyes gathered on those four disks, but no matter how you looked at them, they were nothing but normal compact disks.

They didn't look to be anything special. And that would mean...

"From what I can see, they're exactly what you could find on the market. Even an amateur could easily edit and burn to one."

In regards to my cynicism, the prosecutor clicked her tongue. The judge was making a doubtful face, but she paid it absolutely no mind.

"This is why amateurs are troublesome." The prosecutor left the fact she was an amateur herself on the shelves.

She had always been bad with machines. I'd like to divulge her misdeeds of law school, but now wasn't the time, so I decided to put it off to later.

As much as she hated magic, she wasn't loved by machines. When you think about it, she was living a calamity of a life, that girl.

"First off, this CD isn't available commercially. It's a made-to-order of the security firm. Once the recording starts on one of these disks, until the end of recording, it is impossible to even lay a hand on it. You can't stop it in the middle of recording, and it's impossible to overwrite any data recorded on it."

I put my question do mouth. "Then what happens in case of emergency?"

"For example, an accident, or calamity, or some sudden event that makes it impossible to record, what happens to the CD then"

"In any sudden accident that causes recording to become impossible, for example, the camera is destroyed, or the power goes out making operation impossible, the record is considered complete. You will never be able to store a new recording on that CD."

“But,” I continued on, “And this is just an amateur’s thoughts, but as long as you manage to change the permissions on it, won’t anyone be able to alter it?”

“You really are an amateur,” said the prosecutor in a belittling expression.

... And so are yooou. Why are you suddenly acting like an expert?

“Any modification on this CD is impossible. That is because a defensive magic has been cast onto it. I doubt you’d understand if I explained it, so why not test it out?”

Prosecutor Schaefer took a new CD different from the evidence pieces, walked around the prosecution desk, and stood at the center of the courtroom.

She dropped the CD in her hands to the color. After letting out a single clang, it reflected light from the floor as it fell to its side.

... What is she trying to do?

To answer my question, Prosecutor Schaefer raised her right knee. Because of that, her skirt came with it, and her pale thigh was exposed.

On the sudden occurrence, the court sketch artist open his eyes as far as they went, without stopping his brush, wholeheartedly creating something on his canvas.

... I’m sure he was drawing Kate’s bare leg. Really, someone fire that guy.

The female prosecutor lowered her foot, smashing the CD with all her might. Her sharp heel stabbed in, and I heard a dull thud of impact.

By the way, from her student days, Cate had a habit of fashioning metal into her heels. For anti-molester defense, apparently.

Combating molesters is fine and all, but regardless of the few times she was taken in for inflicting bodily harm, that she still continued wearing them could either be called daring or barbaric. Take your pick.

She stepped on the CD as if it were her mortal foe, again and again. But for some reason, without being able to inflict a single scratch to it, it continued sparkling and reflecting light as it had been doing for a while now.

“Everyone, this is the power of magic.” Cate elegantly spread her hands, and turned to the gallery.

Whoooh! Some words of admiration rose, but let me say it clearly. Most of them were watching the girl's shapely legs that appeared whenever she lifted her heels. They could care less about the magic.

When she dropped the CD, all she had to do was let it go from her hands. But picking it up was a separate issue.

In a skirt that short, how did she plan on retrieving it? I had a somewhat bad premonition.

On the excited sidelong glances of the men in the gallery, Cate promptly made her way to the prosecution desk, and spoke without care. "Eugene, retrieve it."

"Yes ma'am," replied prosecutorial assistant Eugene, as he went to retrieve it like a faithful dog. He did bend down with his backside in the air to retrieve it, but the men of the gallery weren't particularly surprised by that, and for some reason, they seemed disappointed.

I ignored them entirely, calling Eugene over. "Could you show that to me?"

"Eh?" Eugene raised a voice of surprise, but as the prosecutor said, "Very well. Look at it all you want, Mr.. Lawyer," he hurriedly came over to me, said, "Um, here," and blushed for some reason as he handed me the CD.

... What? I looked at it closely as I held it in hand, but besides its glittering lustre, no matter what angle you looked at it, it was a normal CD. Around the size of my palm, and besides the round hole in its center, its lack of characteristics was its greatest characteristic.

"If you want, you can keep it."

... There are still some in stock, the prosecutor said, and continued on.

"As long as magic is protecting it, that disk won't accept any sort of interference from the outside. If you try to forcefully edit its contents, it will be guarded by magic. As long as the magic still protects them, no one would ever be able to alter the footage stored on these CDs."

... Any further complaints, Mr. Lawyer? She tied it all together.

Witness Stand (7) Defense's Rebuttal

“So the CD’s exterior is protected by magic. No one is able to alter them, you say?”

In regards to my question, the prosecutor answered, “Exactly.”

“But if it’s defense magic, wouldn’t it be possible to dispel it? Did they cast something so strong it could never be undone?”

“The defense magic cast by the security firm isn’t particularly strong. So if you wanted to, you could undo the CD’s defenses with over-the-counter magic cancellers.”

She continued on. “But the proof is in that none of these CDs have had their defensive magics disabled.”

“How can you be so sure? If it’s low-level magic, anyone could have used a canceller to undo it.”

“Have you forgotten, Mr. Lawyer?”

After sending me a single menacing glare, Prosecutor Schaefer’s mouth formed a thin smile.

“All the evidence submitted in today’s trial has been subjected to magic parsing by the magic theory research lab. As a result, they didn’t find any signs of cancelling magic used on any of the CDs. All they found was defense magic.”

The prosecutor let out a sigh. “It’s no longer the era where magic is everything, Mr. Lawyer.”

“If you use magic, it will leave a trace without fail. A clear and vivid one. Those that think to use magic to commit the perfect crime should just crash into the wall of the new era, and get themselves locked up in jail.”

The judge closed his eyes, and gave some deep nods.

I’m sure that judge had sat through a number of perfect crimes through magic.

Establishing proof for a crime committed with magic was exceedingly difficult.

No matter how much hardships they put into capturing an atrocious culprit, that they couldn't even be prosecuted due to insufficient evidence was the darkness the department of justice had been carrying for many years.

... But magic parsing, eh?

It seems the magic theory lab was quite the powerful weapon to the prosecutors and police.

It's not like I have an intent to affirm criminals. I think it's best they get caught, and if they found a useful investigation tool to detect them, I'll celebrate it.

... Magic parsing is useful. Is there any way I can use it?

"As a result of magic parsing, there was no signs of any magic used on the disks. There's no mistaking that?"

"You sure are persistent. Isn't that what I've been saying? How about it? Are you still suspecting us of illegal investigation?"

Prosecutor Schaefer looked at the judge. "M'lud, no matter when or where we may be, we make honesty and fairness our motto, using the right investigative means to take criminals in. Illegal investigation? Perish the thought."

"Hmm," a part of the judge's expression looked relieved, as he brushed his tufty white beard and spoke. "That does indeed seem to be the case."

"I'll ask just in case, but when was the magic parsing carried out? After the footage was checked? Or before it? "

The prosecutor went expressionless for a moment, before seemingly sensing my intent, and bursting into a smile.

"Magic parsing was done twice. First, when we retrieved the evidence, and next when we presented them to the court. The results of both analyses were the same. To make sure no one did anything unfair after the parsing took place, the prosecutors always impose a perfect system."

And for some reason, she stuck out her chest in pride.

... It's not like I was trying to get you into a trap or anything.

But I've learned a few nice things.

Magic parsing, the contradiction in the security cameras, and what intrigued me more than anything, Claudia's unnatural movements on screen.

"Then let's look over the security camera footage once more. This time, we have the defendant to check with."

I looked at Claudia on the witness stand. She wasn't crying anymore. But her face was red, as she looked over this way with a troubled look on her face.

It somewhat felt as if I was looking at a stray cat that'd lost its way, and had no idea what to do.

Witness Stand (8) Defense's Inspection

"The security camera footage?" The judge blinked his eyes as he said it.

"Yes. The first clip I'd like to show the defendant is the elevator's interior."

I looked at Claudia on the witness stand.

"Defendant, make sure you watch this footage carefully. If you feel anything questionable or strange, say it at once."

"Um..."

I'm pretty sure this was the first. That Claudia struck up a conversation with me.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Um... w-why are you... me..."

She wanted to say something. But Claudia's mouth simply opened, and closed without anything else coming out. As if something at the back of her throat was preventing anything else from coming out.

... What is it?

I waited for her words, but in the end, she didn't say anything.

Even so, I thought. Compared to when she was wearing her wariness around her body like a cloak, her impression changed a bit.

It's true she still looked wary of me. But the hostility in her eyes had disappeared, and she looked terribly confused, as if she couldn't find the expression to express it.

Embracing her sword in both hands, she simply stared at me intently. Her soft, pale face was now dyed pink, and perhaps because she had cried, her blue eyes were cloudy.

Her light lips were extremely thin, and because of her rough breathing, they were partially open.

Her entire body stiffened as she stared at me trying to say something.

"I'm counting on you."

"... Eh?"

Leaving her with those words, I flipped the switch on the table. The lights of the courtroom went out, and my vision went dim. The air projection display started up in the center of the court.

With the display popping up right in front of the witness stand, Claudia retreated back. Not letting her grip on her sword slacken in that space, her anxious eyes looked up at the scene.

The judge and audience of the gallery the bailiffs and clerks showered it with their attention.

Cate looked at me once before watching the display.

As all eyes gathered, the footage started to play.

From the staticy sandstorm in the court's center, it changed to the elevator's interior.

The scene was right where Claudia entered the elevator, and after she pushed the 'Close' button, she hit the button for the top floor.

"There's something I'd like to confirm with the defendant."

I paused the video momentarily, and as Claudia was making a blank expression, I turned to face her.

Her slim mouth closed tight, as she stared hard at me.

Her attitude stated she wouldn't answer anything unnecessary, but if I don't get her to answer unnecessary things, I'd be troubled.

... Though I'll do my best not to startle her.

"I won't ask anything difficult. So you don't have to worry. Do you know how to ride an elevator?"

"... It was written."

"Written where, exactly?"

"In the letter."

... The letter, huh.

Come to think of it, Claudia's journal did say she received a letter from an unknown sender.

“Do you still have that letter?”

Claudia gave a small shake of her head. “Gone.”

“Why?”

“... Because it told me to burn and dispose of it once I had finished reading.”

Then I won’t be able to obtain it anymore.

... Even so, just who in the world sent her a letter?

Claudia was living in the most dangerous no-man’s land in the world.

Even if there was some way to know her location, just how would you deliver a letter?

... I had never questioned it, but there was some secret to this case.

From the overall impression, it seemed as if there was no doubt Claudia was the culprit. But after processing each and every bit of evidence, the seams come apart.

... Perhaps it’s best I investigate this case more cautiously and diligently.

“Um...”

Claudia fidgeted as she tried to make herself smaller, looking at me with upturned eyes.

“Was that... no good?”

“Hm? Ah, you mean the letter? No, even I’d toss it if it said something like that. No need to mind it. More importantly, the letter didn’t tell you how to get off of elevators, did it.”

“... It didn’t.”

“Just what sort of conversation have you been having over there!?”

With irritated tone, Prosecutor Schaefer intruded in. As she stood imposingly with folded arms, she was definitely angry.

“It doesn’t matter if it told her how to ride elevators properly or not!”

“That’s not true.”

I flatly cut off her words.

“The defendant grew up in an environment outside the reaches of civilization. Why did she who’d never seen an elevator before know how to ride it... this is extremely important testimony. Clerks, I must confirm that this testimony is properly on the record.”

The clerk of court’s job was to make sure all statements were recorded. Even if I didn’t say it, I’m sure they had properly written it down, but if I didn’t say something, there was a risk the judge would forget that statement.

... Now then, the preparations are in order.

The security camera, the evidence, and the contradicting testimony, on top of the unnatural conduct.

I killed my doubt.

There was only one conclusion these arguments led to.

“The defense pleads the defendant’s innocence once more. Besides the victim and defendant there was another one, a third party that had slipped onto the scene.”

Witness Stand (9) Defense's Inspection

The moment I suggested a third party, the court was taken by a stir greater than ever before.

The clerks and sketch artist stopped moving for a moment, an air of unrest drifting through the room as a whole.

The judge was dumbfounded, his mouth left half-open, while Prosecutor Schaefer crossing her arms' eyebrow twitched as she tapered her mouth.

... Their surprise wasn't uncalled for. Even I was half in doubt.

But it's not as if I had no basis. I just wasn't fully convinced.

Claudia had answered to my gamble. Cate was doing quite the nice job as a prosecutor.

... All that's left was for me to do what I had to.

There were no tricks in the security camera's footage. That had just been proven.

If someone from the outside tried to alter the CD, the defense magic would activate.

It was possible to dispel the magic, but if you did, the trace would remain. As magic parsing had revealed no such trace, there was no possibility of someone tampering with the footage.

But when you compared the clips, there were parts that contradicted one another.

It was snowing on November 11th. But when Claudia attacked the victim on the roof, there was no snow at the rooftop crime scene.

On the other hand, there was snow piled up on the park the body had fallen.

If there was no alteration to any footage, then why would these contradictions come out?

They were both true, yet there was no consistency.

When each individual piece was correct, it became strange when you put them together.

... This was just like a puzzle.

To correctly put a puzzle together, you had to make sure each piece was joined up in its correct place.

The picture we were looking at right now was made of mismatched pieces. So the final image was blurry, and there were inconsistencies in the finer details.

Then what was wrong? That was obvious. It was...

“It seems we have made a huge misunderstanding.”

I looked over the whole court, looked at Claudia last.

“A question for the defendant.”

“Y-yes.”

“When exactly did you leave the scene of the crime?”

In regards to that question, Claudia made a confused face. Of course, that wasn't just her, the people in the gallery were making dubious looks as well.

The judge stroked his beard as he tilted his head.

... Bang! The sound of someone hitting a desk resounded through the room. It was Prosecutor Schaefer.

“What sort of question are you asking at this point? One look at the security camera, and it'll all be settled, right?”

“I... didn't ask you anything.”

Holding up my palm, I interrupted Cate's words.

“Defendant Rheinland,” I took my eyes off of Cate, and looked at Claudia. “I want to hear it from your mouth”

“When exactly did you leave the scene... the hotel?”

“I...”

Her expression became more and more incomprehensive. Scrunching her brow, she put power into the hand clenching her sword. Her lips came firmly

together, as she looked as if she were enduring so as not to let her words fly out on their own.

“You can just answer honestly.”

I spoke as I looked straight at Claudia’s blue eyes on the verge of tears.

“There’s nothing to fear. I’m... on your side.”

Just what was pulling on her nerves? I couldn’t tell. But as if resolving something, she lifted her face, lightly opening her bound mouth, and speaking on the stand.

“I... never left the hotel that night.”

Witness Stand (10) The Accused

“After defeating the demon lord... I was so tired...”

All those in the court lent an ear to her words. The inquisitive looks from the gallery were strongest, and behind her, as she stood on the stand, they held a pressure as if they’d pierce her through.

But even so, she continued in her tottering tone. “I... spent the night there.”

“... What?”

Crap. I actually said that out loud. But while I don’t mean to defend myself, I don’t think that sort of reaction was unreasonable, to be honest. Claudia’s words had caused quite the inexpressibly dubious atmosphere to shroud the court.

... Bang! A desk was harshly banged upon. Naturally, it was Prosecutor Schaefer.

She was looking down with her shoulders shaking, but it didn’t seem that she was laughing. It I had to say...

“What are you talking about? You mean to say you spent a carefree night at the murder scene?”

... If I had to say, the female prosecutor had completely snapped.

“N-no. I was, um... not there, somewhere further in...”

Overpowered by Prosecutor Schaefer, Claudia’s already-small voice became even harder to hear.

... Even so, what is the meaning of this, I wonder.

I recalled the footage at the viewing platform. I don’t think that was the sort of place Claudia could spend a night.

But Claudia had been living a life where camping was only natural, so perhaps the place didn’t really matter?

No, that’s wrong. That isn’t it. To she who lived a life naturally camping within

a forest of monsters, the viewing platform wasn't the proper place for her to sleep.

A place where she could best ensure her safety should be the easiest place for her to feel at ease.

On the female prosecutor's voice comprised of rage, I saw Claudia keep the sword on her person, embracing it tightly with both hands. It looked like my conjecture wasn't wrong.

Within Claudia's cowering motions, she occasionally sent imploring glances my way.

I don't think I can pacify this prosecutor. I've got to defend her statement somehow, or her testimony will have been for nothing.

But how?

A place she could easily feel at ease. Such a place... wasn't there only one?

I remembered my conversation with the boss the other day. The hotel that became the crime scene was...

"There is a cliff behind the hotel that became the scene of the crime," I said to Prosecutor Schaefer, and went on.

"Westminster Hotel is a tourist hotel merged in with the cliff. So it has an entrance both on the ground floor, and on the roof. Did you know that?"

"And what are you trying to say by that?"

I swiftly responded to her query.

"There is a forest that stretches out on top of the cliff. Isn't it likely that the defendant crossed from the roof to the clifftop, and camped the night out there?"

"Hoh. That sure is a strange hotel."

The judge raised a hysteric voice, before going on.

"Hm, then let us ask the defendant. Did you move from the hotel's roof to the clifftop, and spend the night in the forest over there?"

After hearing it to the end, Claudia gave a nod.

“Hmm, so you did,” Prosecutor Schaefer crossed her arms, her manner of speech becoming rougher.

It seems she was irritated. She undid her arms, and hit the table before speaking.

“And so? Just what is the defense trying to prove with that testimony?”

“Of course, that would be the existence of the third party. From that testimony, it should be more than clear that a third party was caught on that security camera.”

... We’ve just proven that.

Witness Stand (11) The Accused

“When I saw the surveillance camera footage, there was something strange that I noticed. It was the defendant using the elevator.”

I turned back the footage. The display floating in the center of the courtroom followed in kind, and showed the scene of Claudia getting on the elevator from the first floor again.

I pressed play. Claudia in the footage pressed the elevator buttons. First she pressed ‘close’, and then the button for the roof.

I stopped the footage there. “Here is the problem.”

“I’d like to ask you, m’lud, but when you board an elevator, what button do you press first? The floor? Or the ‘close’ button?”

“Muh? Well let’s see, I don’t really pay mind to it, so I wonder? Which is it? I think I probably push the floor button.”

“Thank you. By the way, I have a tendency to press ‘close’ before the floor.”

“... If I see someone who might want to ride coming, I press ‘close’. Otherwise, I want to ride in leisure, so I only push the floor number.”

... When no one had asked her, Prosecutor Schaefer took the initiative in answering for some reason. And she continued on in an irritated tone.

“What about it?”

“As you’ve all just answered, there is no right answer to it. Whatever order you press them in varies from person to person, it’s free choice. So in the camera footage, the defendant pressing ‘close’ before inputting the floor number isn’t anything particular to take note of. But... for some reason, the figure caught on the third CD didn’t do so.”

I changed the scene. While it was a different video, the place it displayed was identical, the same elevator interior as before. The only difference would have to be there was no one inside it. But as the digital count started from 0:00, it was clearly in a different frame of time than the previous one.

After the clock's numbers ticked by, the elevator's door opened, and a figure entered.

The figure was wearing a black coat. Their face was completely covered with a hood, so it wasn't clear.

That black figure that entered the elevator prioritized pressing the floor button, before waiting for the door to close on its own.

"To this point, I had thought this individual was the defendant. But something felt off. Why would the defendant press 'close' before the floor number when going up, yet only press the floor number when going down? Of course, there's a possibility it's just a coincidence. A person's sense of values can vary. It's a strange habit, but I won't say it can't happen. However, that is something you can say precisely because you live in a civilized society."

I pointed at the defendant. "Until the day of the incident, the defendant had never ridden an elevator in her life. Even if she just so happened to know how to go up in an elevator, she didn't know how to go down. There's no way she'd take the risk of pushing a different series of buttons on the way down."

"Hah? Are you an idiot? Anyone could figure an elevator out if they looked at it!"

I shook my head at the prosecution's rebuttal. "That is your common sense. That sense isn't common to her."

"What's that? You mean to say she has to be taught such a simple thing before she can understand it?"

"Precisely. The defendant didn't know. Anything. Knowing how to get on an elevator does not mean knowing how to get off. So after getting off the elevator, she went out of her way to try closing it with the button on the outside, for us, it's a bizarre action we'd never take in the first place. And that has been firmly left on the security camera's recording."

I looked at the court again. And I spoke to the judge.

"M'lud. The person shown in the third CD is not the defendant. There was a third party we still don't know about at the scene. As long as this third party isn't identified, we can't conclude the defendant as the murderer."

The judge followed the air display with his eyes.

“Hmmmm. I didn’t notice it when I first saw it, but there truly is no consistency with the defendant’s conduct. Looking once more, it does indeed look as if the second and third disk show different individuals.”

“They are different people. The defendant has testified. She spent the night of the incident camping out on the cliffs. Meaning at this late-night timeframe, there’s no way the defendant would use the elevator. This is a clear contradiction. So... we are in need of a thorough investigation!”

After I declared the last part, I felt an ominous chill.

Turning, I saw Prosecutor Schaefer was glaring my way with narrowed eyes.

Come to think of it, why was this woman keeping silent all this time? When she’s so annoying regularly, if she suddenly turns quiet, it actually worries me.

Prosecutor Schaefer was expressionless. Simply tapping her index finger against the desk.

It seems she had nothing left to say... if she wasn’t going to say anything, this was a chance.

I started with my questions at once.

“A question for the defendant. After you attacked the victim, and moved to the cliff, you spend the night there. Did you move anywhere after that?”

On my question, Claudia’s mouth turned sour for some reason.

... Was she angry? Why?

Still glaring, Claudia opened her mouth.

“Um... no... I was in the forest until day broke the next day... around eight in the morning, I took the elevator, and left the hotel.”

Her hesitant tone was hard to hear, but I’m sure that’s what she testified.

... Alright! I did it!

I felt like clapping for myself. With this, we can prolong the trial for investigation.

“Objection.”

That one word soaked the triumphant feel I had built up in cold water.

I wondered who had objected, but I immediately found the perpetrator. It was Prosecutor Schaefer.

“W-what is it?”

“No. Just that testimony she just gave... I just thought it contradicted the evidence.”

When she had been so irritated to that point, she was especially calm. On the contrary, that made me feel anxious.

“Meaning after the defendant assaulted the victim on the roof, she didn’t use the elevator once until eight in the morning the next day?”

“T-that’s what it would mean.”

I agreed. That wasn’t wrong. But what is it, this feeling. She was expressionless to the end, as she replied in a somewhat dry voice.

“Then let’s watch the continuation of the third CD. The third is the continuation of the second, so naturally, when this disk hits eight, the defendant should be displayed, right?”

“... Eh?”

Huh? But if you think of it chronologically, that’s what it would mean, but...

... What’s this chill I’m feeling?

Prosecutor Schaefer took the remote in one hand, bringing up the air projection display. The images immediately came up.

She put it on fast forward. Since the testimony said eight, we only had to look at that timeframe, but she faithfully paused the scene whenever anyone came in, confirming them.

She fast forwarded whenever no one was on board. Paused whenever anyone appeared. That cycle went on and on until the end came at 23:59.

“Huh? That’s strange. Defendant, I didn’t see you anywhere.”

... Isn't that a contradiction, Mr. Lawyer? The prosecutor said.

Witness Stand (12) The Accused

“When testimony and evidence contradict one another, you know which one takes priority, right?”

The prosecutor used a terribly restful tone. She recited it as if she were chewing over each and every word before letting it out of her mouth. But from the penetrating cold look she sent my way, I couldn't feel the sensation that I was alive.

... Crap. I slipped up.

No, my thoughts were naïve. Right. Those camera are normally working 24 hours a day. Besides the time of the crime the cameras are constantly taking in the scenery.

“M'lud, it seems the defendant has given us false testimony.”

The prosecution's attack didn't stop. She spoke to the judge. “As long as there is suspicion of perjury, the defendant's testimony doesn't merit any worth.”

“W-wait a second.”

“No, I won't wait. This is a place ruled by the law. As long as you remain faithful to the rules, everything is permitted, but if you break them, you shall receive a suitable punishment. The crime of presenting false testimony to the court is a heavy one. Of course it is. This is a problem related to the country's definition of law.”

The prosecutor brought it to a finish with those words.

The judge made a grim expression.

“If Prosecutor Schaefer's assertion is true, it truly is a major problem we cannot overlook. The defense shall answer with that in mind. If the defendant has given false testimony, then all you have based on her testimony must be disregarded, and we will see no further need for a trial. But if it isn't false, the defense has the obligation to prove it.”

“ ... ”

... Crap. She really got me. The situation reversed.

Right now, what was supporting Claudia: it was her testimony. It was precisely because of her testimony that we had successfully dragged on the trial so long.

But if she was branded with the sin of perjury, defending her would be hopeless.

I have to somehow clear these charges... but how?

“Mr. Lawyer? You don’t look so well. Your face is pale. Ah, also your hairstyle is weird.”

... Don’t bring my hair into this!

Before I knew it, the prosecution was back to normal, her normal face of leisure returned. Her mouth moved slightly... I got the feeling she was saying, how unfortunate for you.

“I... I haven’t lied. Honestly!”

Claudia leaned over the witness stand, pleading with all her might.

But the judge shook his head. “Unfortunately, this is a court. As long as evidence of perjury comes up, you can only show evidence of your innocence.”

... I know that. But...

Claudia didn’t lie. She didn’t; I’ll believe that. But I don’t have the basis to substantiate it.

... Bang! I couldn’t help but hit my fist against the desk.

Just a little bit more. Just a little, and I was sure to grasp something. With this...

“Hmm.. It seems the defense has nothing to add. Then it’s about time we move to the sentence...”

The judge extended a hand to his gavel. I got the feeling everything was moving in slow motion.

The former of the expressionless Prosecutor Schaefer’s lips rose. As a smile of guaranteed victory rose on her face, she used her sharp eyes to look through me.

Claudia didn't unhand her sword.

... I guess it was natural. That weapon was the only thing protecting her.

But for some reason, she was looking at me. Without taking her eyes off me, her clouded pupils looked my way as she tried to say something.

... What's with those eyes. I can't save you anymore...

"Hold it!"

The judge's hand stopped. Right before he could lower his gavel. "What is it, Mr. Lockhart?"

"The defense..."

... Don't I have anything?

"Believes in..."

... Anything is fine.

"The defendant's testimony."

... Please give me something.

"The defendant hasn't lied about anything."

... I believe in her.

"And the defense shall prove that."

... But I can't prove it.

"Hm, is that so. Then let us ask the defense. The defendant's testimony is genuine. What is your evidence?"

"That is..."

I looked at Claudia. My memories since I met her in the detention center played back like a revolving lantern.

Each and every still image, I recalled each in sequence.

The riot in the detention center and the testimony in court... no, that's wrong. There was something before that.

The first time I saw her wasn't the center. In the boss's office, I had seen a

picture of her there.

It wasn't right to place the detention center first.

Order... right, it's order.

I had finally caught onto it... the trick in this case.

"The defendant attacked the victim on the night of the 10th. Not the 11th, the 10th. So naturally, when she left the hotel, it was eight on the morning of the 11th. So there's no way she'd every be shown between 0:00 and 23:59 on the 12th. The defendant... will be right where she should be, on the footage of the 11th at eight."

Continuing on, I spoke.

"The defense asserts that the security camera footage... its dating is off. She really did come to the hotel on the 10th. She... hasn't told a single lie."

Witness Stand (13) Prosecution's Claims

"If the witness isn't lying, then the liar here has to be you, Mr. Lawyer."

Prosecutor Schaefer hid her smile of victory. Touching a hand to her hip, she showed a gloomy expression as she spoke. "To be honest, I've had it up to here with the defense's arbitrary conjecture."

"Hm. It's true Prosecutor Schaefer has a point."

The judge was critical. But it doesn't seem he was a hundred percent critical of me, a look of anguish floating on his face.

"But it's also true there is a problem with the evidence submitted by the prosecution. At present, there is no doubt in my mind that the culprit is the defendant. But from what I hear from the defense, I also feel some of the prosecutions claims are coming apart."

"M'lud," I objected, "The defense requests that all the prosecutions surveillance camera footage be displayed in the court."

"As the prosecution has claimed, the security camera footage has not been edited or falsified by a third party. But that's the footage we're talking about, and it would be possible to falsify another portion."

"... What are you trying to say?"

Prosecutor Schaefer's expression was stiff. Hitting both hands on the table, she leaned in, and gave me a harsh glare.

Because of that menacing approach of the female prosecutor, I thought I would falter for a moment. But I straightened my back, and glared back.

"When were these security camera reels filmed? There's no date stamped anywhere on them. Just how was the security firm distinguishing between days?"

It's not as if I had asked anything particularly difficult, but for some reason, Prosecutor Schaefer shut her mouth, creating a strange space of silence.

The one whose fuse snapped was the judge. "Prosecutor Schaefer? What

seems to be the matter?" he urged for a reply.

The usual her would have gallantly replied the moment the judge urged it. But she wasn't herself momentarily. Her eyes still glaring at me, Prosecutor Schaefer didn't say a word. Her expression was stiff, and looking closely, I could see some sweat dripping.

December was an exceedingly cold month. Even if the heater was working, in this courtroom that still held a hint of cold, there was barely anyone breaking into a sweat.

But the prosecutor was definitely sweating. The other people didn't noticed it, but I alone could see Cate was clearly flustered.

... But why? I just asked about a security firm's means of organizing CDs, so why is Cate in such dismay?

"... The security camera reels aren't stored in real time. They are temporarily sent to a hard disk recorder, which then stores the video data onto a CD. But even so, this time loss isn't anything significant, so the time shown on the camera, and the time stored on the CD are practically the same."

After saying that much, Prosecutor Schaefer wiped her sweat with a hand. While she was speaking coherently, she wasn't actually saying anything important.

... Meaning her current explanation is just her buying time.

Come this far, I was finally convinced.

... What are you hiding, Cate.

I still didn't know what the prosecution was hiding. But it must be something exceptionally inconvenient to their case.

Something inconvenient to the prosecutor. That would mean something convenient for me.

Let's drag it out.

"How long do you plan on evading the question?" I pressed the prosecutor. "Please stop dragging this trial out in vain, and promptly provide an answer to my question."

... Tsk. She clicked her tongue and scowled.

But on a whap of the judge's gavel, the besmirching stopped, and I stood up straight.

"Prosecutor Schaefer. Answer the question. Could it be you don't know how the company keeps track of the dates?"

... M'lud, that is a foolish question, I wanted to say. That preparation maniac Cate would never fall to making such a mistake. She knows. She knows better than anyone. And that's precisely why she's so hard-pressed to answer.

But sensing she couldn't put it off any further, she finally opened her heavy mouth.

"The footage captured by the security cameras is sent to a room on the hotel's third floor. That guard room has a special hard disk recorder from the security company, and there the discs are automatically preserved. Once preservation is done, the guard staff retrieve the CDs, and put them in their proper cases. At that time, the date is printed on the cases."

... That is how the security firm preserves its data, said the prosecutor with an increasingly sour face.

At first, I couldn't understand. Why would this be so fatal to the prosecution.

But the judge's words made me realize just how important of a hint this fact was to the truth of the case.

"Hm, if that's the case, the problem lies in who was tasked with storing the CDs that day."

.....!! Who... would that be?

Within our exchanges up to now, it was clear there was no individual who could do that. Someone did something no one could do. It would be accurate to say that someone's actions had brought about our current situation.

Wouldn't that guy be the one at the center of this incident?

Who handed the letter to Claudia, who instigated her, who was the victim in the first place, and why was he dead...

“It goes without saying there’s only one person who could’ve done that.”

With those words alone, the female prosecutor shut her mouth tight. Without saying anything further, she stared off into a brighter tomorrow.

Witness Stand (14) Calling a Witness

... Only one?

The female prosecution's phrasing was full of implication. So I couldn't go about not pursuing it.

"The prosecution has claimed that there was no trace of the security footage being modified from the outside. Sure enough, I'm convinced no third party would be able to change or fabricate. The stored footage or time stamp, but there's plenty of room for falsification of the date."

I took my eyes off of the female prosecutor who wouldn't say another word, and pleaded to the judge.

"If the date is only written on when the recorded CDs are stored in a case, there's no need for any special magic. Anyone could have altered the date."

And I said at the end.

"The defense requests to summon a witness. There's a need for us to hear the testimony of all the hotel's security from the day of the crime-the 10th and 11th – and the 12th."

"Hm, summoning witnesses, is it?" The judge made a stern expression, touching his white beard. "As long as there is a problem with the evidence, it's true there is a need to examine their opinions, but Prosecutor Schaefer? Is there anything you wish to add?"

For some reason, Prosecutor Schaefer wouldn't say a single word. That was contrarily ominous, and I had lost track of whether I was truly cornering Cate or not.

... No, there's no doubt it's a terrible truth for the prosecution.

But would that really be something convenient for me?

Sensing my question, the prosecutor finally opened her heavy mouth towards the judge.

“M’lud, the prosecution accepts the defense’s request.”

... What?

Her expression was one as if her hesitation had finally cleared up. Cate lost power in her shoulders, and after letting out a deep breath, she raised her head, and spoke.

“We will summon all hotel security present on the day of the crime. If we hear their testimony, I’m sure M’lud will be satisfied... with the defendant’s guilt.”

The moment she uttered those last words, the hair of my body stood on end.

What was she talking about?

The evidence up to not was plenty to put me at the advantage, yet she still had something?

“Originally, I had planned to call one as a witness for this trial, but he declined the summons, so I wasn’t able to get his testimony. Of course, at the time, there wasn’t any special reason to call him, so there was no helping it.”

Prosecutor Schaefer carried on with a regretful face. But it was starting to stink terribly, terrible of bad acting.

“However, now that a need has come for us to investigate the evidence, the witness has an obligation to come to court. If summoned as a witness, they won’t be able to decline. It looks like I can finally invite him to the court.”

... Mr. Lawyer, thank you for going out of your way to summon a witness, said Prosecutor Schaefer with an especially bright smile.

Court Adjourned

“M’lud, the prosecution wishes to prepare to summon its witness, so we request an adjournment of court.”

Said Prosecutor Schaefer in an indifferent tone. I felt a bit of discomfort at her way of speech without any emotion behind it.

...She really was annoyed, that she couldn’t end it in a day. But I wasn’t able to contain my feelings as well as her.

So no one could see, I clenched my fist triumphantly beneath my desk.

... I’m saved... that really was, really was dangerous.

I’m no defendant, but I thought I was dead. But as I was able to safely leave the courtroom, I was satisfied from the bottom of my heart.

I was a court-appointed lawyer. Just by extending the trial by the day, my standing was one where the country was obligated to pay me extra. But this sense of fullness was filled with something greater than my joy at getting the reward.

I did feel some unrest at Cate’s last statement. But let’s forget it for now. We’ll be seeing each other again soon enough. To prepare myself for that time, I just wanted to taste this fullness for the time being.

I felt strength drain from my body, as I slumped into the chair. Come to think of it. Over the course of this entire trial, I hadn’t sat once.

Finally sitting in it, I felt a cool sensation through my bottom. But right now, I felt I would collapse if I wasn’t supported by anything.

... Whap! The sound of the gavel resounded through the court. I straightened myself, but I didn’t have the mood to get up from this chair.

“Hm. Certainly, as things stand, even if the deliberation continues, we’ll only proceed down parallel lines. I accept the prosecution’s request. This court is now adjourned. But even so.”

The judge spoke with his stern expression. “ The two of you surprise me.”

“Prosecutor Schaefer’s abilities in pursuing the truth are splendid. And Mr. Lockhart. For you to turn everything around with a single piece of evidence... I’ve only ever seen one person with your level of ability before in my life.”

“I-it’s an honor”

“...”

Completely limp from exhaustion, I was flustered, as I stumbled over my words. Prosecutor Schaefer made a sour look as she folded her arms in silence.

“Then today’s deliberation ends here. Court adjourned.”

... Whap, went the judge’s gavel.

With that as the sign, the bailiff waiting behind approached the witness stand.

Claudia was at the stand. While trying to shrink her body, she glared at the bailiff with a look of wariness taking a step back.

“Claudia,” I called out her name in the courtroom.

Come to think of it, perhaps this was the first time. Calling her name, I mean.

She reacted to my words, turning my way. There was a wrinkle on her forehead, a doubtful expression floating over her face.

“I’ll visit you. This time, I’ll have you tell me your story. So wait for me.”

“U-um...”

Claudia opened and closed her mouth, trying to say something, but the bailiff grabbed her wrists, said, “Let’s go,” and forcefully led her off.

For some reason, the bailiff didn’t try to take her sword away. But there wasn’t anyone in this courtroom who wished to question that fact, as Claudia preciousely held it close so as to never let go of it again.

Claudia Rheinland. She’s being charged for first-degree murder.

If she’s not innocent, it’s life in prison... or death.

The door closed. But the sight of her lonely back was scorched into my mind.